

“Finding Sacred Amidst the Profane”

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First, I begin by my need to apologize to all of the people from Iowa State, Drake and Northern Iowa. The reason for the bulletin [cover – which focuses on the University of Iowa] - if you are a sports person at any level you know the story that I’m about to tell; but for the rest of you who aren’t, well maybe this is new, or maybe you heard it otherwise, but it bears repeating. Last Sunday after church, some people went home and watched a very powerful basketball game - not because of who won or who lost - although Iowa won. (I need to point that out.) But because of a point guard sophomore, named Jordan Bohannon. And, for those of you who know, he went up to the line - he had tied the record for the most free throws in a row: 34. It’s amazing, That is hard enough to do if you are a good basketball player and you are just standing at the free throw line, but under the pressure of a game situation every week, he is up there and he is making them in a row.

On this particular day, he went up there. He had tied the record and now he was going to break it. The game was still in doubt. They were ahead, but not by enough that he could just inadvertently miss a shot. He threw it [the ball] up there and clanked it right off the rim. And, then he pointed up to Heaven.

For the rest of you who don’t know the story, I want to share just how important that moment was; because for you Iowan’s who follow Iowa basketball, going way back, you remember a gentleman named Chris Street. An amazing basketball player. It was such a sad moment. In 1993, he held the record of most free throws in a row. But, before another basketball game, where he could have continued his record, he was killed in an automobile accident.

So, Chris’ family - his mom and dad - continued to go to games. They continue to heal even after all of these years, by being part of Iowa basketball. And, Iowa basketball - like so many things in Iowa - is so supportive of them and wants them to remain part of their family. So, Mr. and Mrs. Street knew the players on the team and the players were told Chris’ story. So, Jordan got to know them and the story, and felt in that moment that it was more important for Chris’ memory, and his legacy, to live on, than it was for him [Jordan] to break that record.

Now, how many 20-year-old young people would be humble enough, in this age of arrogance, to make that kind of decision? I’m so proud that he was at Iowa and did it [intentionally missed the free throw] on purpose, in Chris’s memory.

Now, it is a neat story. But why am I sharing it this morning? The reason that I’m sharing it is because what Jordan did that last Sunday was to bring together the sacred and the profane. The profane – basketball. Now, [the word] “profane” - some people try to define that as something bad. “Profane” is defined as, not devoted to holy or religious purposes.

I know a whole lot of people think that basketball is a “holy” enterprise [laughter], but it really isn’t. But, Jordan made it holy - taking a profane action like a sports event, something that wasn’t sacred, and making it so by the way in which he acted. That is what all of us are

called to do. Even the cynical sports writers were moved. It was on ESPN. It was everywhere. And here, even the Des Moines Register said, "Some things are bigger than records and personal glory; and on Sunday, Bohannon proved that." The world stopped, because even the most cynical people realized the most sacred and the profane had come together, in one beautiful moment.

And that, folks, is what we are called to do - to bring together the profane and the sacred, and show the world through our sacred acts what it means to be holy in this world. Now, I think when Jordan got up there he just shot that because he loved these two people [Chris Street's parents] and he ached for the loss they had to endure; but I don't think he realized the impact that what he did in that moment; the impact that it would have on this country and this entire world, as they watched it either online, on television, or where ever it was. We don't know, sometimes, when we make a decision that is humble and selfless, the transformative difference that we can make - taking the profane and making it sacred.

Now I have a number of writers that I like, but one in particular is Thomas Moore. He is a former Monk. He is a psychotherapist and a prolific writer. One of his books that really transformed my life early in my ministry, was a book called "Care of the Soul." But, he wrote a book after that, entitled "The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life." I don't think it's as good as "Care of the Soul," but I think it is, in this particular area. He talks about how to make everyday life sacred. How do we make that happen? He talks about how you can make doing the dishes sacred. You can make taking out the garbage sacred. Why? Because it helps your home. And, in my life, it makes my wife happy - and that can be a holy experience. [Laughter!] (Boy, I'm 0 for 2. I'd better be careful! [Laughter.]) But, seriously, when you care for your home and you think about whether it's your spouse, or your children, or you go do this at your work - when you are selfless in your care for another person, you are bringing the sacred to that place and to that time and in that moment.

It can be profound. And, what Thomas Moore does in a number of his books, is help to remind us that the sacred isn't just something that happens here in the church, here on a Sunday morning. You can potentially bring the sacred to every situation you are in. I thought, "OK, we will see." He calls it "re-enchantment." And, he said, an enchanted life has many moments when the heart is overwhelmed by beauty, and the imagination is electrified by some haunting quality in the world, or by a spirit or voice speaking from deep within - a place, a thing or a person. And I just described one in Jordan Bohannon. He did something that was beautiful, and it electrified us by the haunting reality that not all sports has to be "me" censored. And he did it in that moment. And when we do something that is so shockingly selfless, people still pay attention.

So, I really wanted to take Thomas Moore to heart, and I thought, "Alright, let's find the most difficult thing I could think of - the most impossibly cynical thing in the world - and see if it could actually be sacred." And he actually deals with it.

The thing I thought of was politics. Now, I'm not going to get into Republicans or Democrats, or those darn Libertarians and Green Party people. No, what I'm going to talk about, and what he talks about in this book, is the beauty and the spirituality of politics. Because we have become cynical about it, he claims, because we have forgotten what is truly sacred about our politics; and, if we learn what is truly meaningful about it maybe we can restore it again and make it sacred.

He said that “politics” in the Greek is “polis” which means “city.” And, “politics” comes from that Greek word “polis,” which also means “police.” And in the same way that police care for the people in their area and city - and politicians, by the same definition, are caregivers who should be providing for the people - caring for the people under their care. They are in some way a holy priesthood that cares for the people who they are responsible to: their constituency. Now I don’t know that we have heard that in a long time; but that, at its heart, is what we should be about.

Now when Jesus turned over those tables, he participated in a political act. He was taking on the unjust system that was prevalent at that time. He [Jesus] changed it and he transformed that political moment. That is what Thomas Moore said: we can make our political system sacred. He even calls it a *spirituality* of politics. Now that is awfully close to an oxymoron; but let’s find out if he is right.

The word “metropolis” is another part of that “polis,” and it refers to weaving together several communities into one. That is what politicians do. They weave neighborhoods and different groups of people, guiding them all to become one - under one flag, under one people. The root word surrounding “politics” implies a heart as well as a brain - the care taking of human life, rather than an effort to keep the machine of society well-oiled and operating. It should be about caring for the individual and corporate needs of the people.

It’s no accident that one of the principal roles of politicians, he [Moore] said, is to be a representative at State Funerals. He said that, typical of modern times, we have vestiges of powerful funeral rights for the community, not only providing over funeral rites, but gathering people together for other religious rituals - such as receiving foreign heads of state with pageantry, for giving speeches in parks or at parades on holidays (which [the word] “holidays” comes from the words “holy day”), and even throwing out the first pitch at a baseball game. The sacred and profane coming together in that role of politics.

We Americans pride ourselves, he said, on the separation of church and state, but if we were wholly secular, we would take all of those vestiges and symbols away, and we would lose our soul. Now we have come close to that, but we have an obligation to restore the “sacredness” to our way of life and that is included in our politics.

To quote Thomas Moore again, he said, “How could we run a country according to the most recent reckoning of pollsters, unless we considered citizens as mere numbers?” Yet, that is what we do all of the time. They follow the polls. It grew with Bill Clinton’s administration and that is what has gotten us to this place under the Trump administration rationale. All the way along, polls have guided decision-making, and that is a numbers game; rather than what, in the long term, helps society individually and as a society grow in depth, in mutual respect in weaving together groups of people under one flag.

No wonder why many people have become disenchanted with politics. We’ve lost the care and love that we should have for one another. According to Thomas Moore again, he says, “Not only can politics be enchanting - an almost absurd notion for modern life - it can be one of the most enchanting aspects of life.”

Why? Because through politics can *real, lasting*, transformative change take place. Charity is great, but it only feeds somebody for a moment. It is only through the sacredness of politics that change can happen; that can lift people out of poverty; can care for people in their needs; can push people away from war; and, can provide healing and lasting peace. That can only be done in politics. So why don't we talk about that? Why has it become so divisive that we no longer can share and talk about the one thing that can make the lasting difference?

Now I got to thinking about that. Give me proof! So, I tried to think about what would be one of those difference-makers. I thought about a few. Think about - for those of you who are old enough - what it was like that night when we first saw people from East Berlin cross over into the West and people from the West crossing over into the East. I remember vividly the person picking up that pick ax and chipping away at that wall and the guards dropping their weapons. I had tears in my eyes and I know most of you did that remember that event. It reminded me that there is still the Spirit working in this world.

None of us in that moment could be cynical because we saw God at work. It was a political movement, not done by politicians, but by groups of people who would no longer stay with the status quo. I saw it in a more dreadful but powerful way in 911. I had never seen this country, in my lifetime, as drawn together as on the fateful, horrific day when we watched those Twin Towers fall. Yet, we were drawn together. We were no longer people of color or white; we were no longer one or another. We were all Americans screaming for healing.

I was amazed that the country did not respond with retribution upon its own people who were Muslim, but we sought to do something greater. And we did, by and large. It was an amazing moment in history and it was led in a politics that provided hope.

That is what we need to look at, because Thomas Moore said, "The other spirituality of politics is hope - that when you have that, all things are possible."

I experienced it again in 2008 - politics aside - that an African-American could be called President of the United States. Politics aside, that was a shocking, amazing moment. One I never thought would happen anytime soon and I think it shocked many. It was profoundly hopeful and renewing - politics aside - that a group of people could now be seen as having hope who didn't feel they had it before.

Politics involves care and tending of all the rich soul of life. That is what we talk about; that is what we are trying to do when Jeff [Geerts, who gave the Minute for Mission] gets up here and he talks about the Immigration Garden; the caring of people, gathering them together - giving them the tools to do things to make a difference; and to watch, not only our church, but Lutheran Social Services and the City of Des Moines, all working together, to get these plots together, so that people can feed themselves and learn to make a living; to have a vocation, so that they can make a difference for their family and for larger groups of people. It's profound. And, all of that can be done in a positive way, when we can talk about our politics in a way that is hopeful and spiritual.

Thomas Moore teaches us that when all of us leaders in the community discover the sheer joy of creating a way of life that serves families, enables work and fosters genuine communal spirit, we can begin to touch upon the sacredness that lies in the simple word

“politics.” If even politics can be sacred then everything else can too; whether it’s how we walk the dog, [or] the way we greet someone else. It’s with openness and hope. And, our hope and goal is that we can transform our own hearts and minds so that we can clank that fall when need be and give of ourselves to someone else, so that others can feel safe, respected and whole.

So I think that Thomas Moore is right - we can find the sacred in the most cynical places. But do you know how God provides that? Through you and me. And I pray that God can restore our hearts and wipe away that cynicism, so that we can make a spiritual difference in our politics, in our kitchen, in our work place and everywhere else, because this world needs that kind of hope. And it begins with us. Amen