

7 Sunday Ordinary Time; A

I want to begin my sermon today by asking you to picture a familiar household scene: It is the end of a busy day. The family has just finished their evening meal, and the mother says to one of her teenage daughters, “Becky, would you, please, wash the dishes and clean up the kitchen?” Becky responds by saying, “why me? I did it last time. Besides that I have schoolwork. What about Alice? She never has to help.” Then Alice fires back, “Becky, that’s not true, and you know it. Last week I did the dishes three times and you only did them once. “

More heated words are exchanged; when the father steps in and issues an ultimatum: “Becky, I don’t want to hear anymore about it. You get up right now and do what your Mother asked you to do.” So Becky in silence drags herself to the task and does a halfway decent job of cleaning the kitchen, being very careful to do not a bit more than the bare minimum. And the rest of the evening she is terribly unhappy, and part of her unhappiness spills over on everyone in the house.

Now, let’s replay that same scene with a slightly different twist. Go back to the place where the mother asks Becky to do the dishes. This time she answers, “Yes Ma’am;” and with friendly conversation goes to work. She not only washes the dishes but cleans the toughest pots and pans, and even cleans the stove. From the kitchen, she asks whether her father and mother would like another cup of coffee. They answer in the affirmative. She serves it with a smile. They receive it with gratitude.

When the task is finished, Becky is happy, and part of her happiness overflows on the entire family.

I tell that little story not to single out the teenagers, but because it is a parable of life. It is the very thing Jesus was talking about in our gospel reading, when he said, “Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles. “ With that simple statement, Our Lord is reminding you and me that all life is divided into two categories - the obligatory and the voluntary. There are some things we have to do whether we want to or not. There are other things that we can do, but only if we choose to do them.

Becky is really a picture of every one of us. We all get kitchen duty sometimes, or something like it. Life makes certain demands of us that have to be met, but we have an option as to how we meet them. We can do our duty reluctantly, grudgingly, meeting only the minimum requirements and nothing more. Or we can do our duty gladly and then go beyond it, not only washing the dishes, but cleaning the pots and pans, cleaning the stove, and serving the extra coffee. And the difference between those two options is profound. If we spend our days within the narrow limits of that first mile, life will always be a boring and plain duty. But if we have the courage and good sense to walk that second mile, life will be transformed into a high and holy privilege.

Now, let's take this principle and seek to apply it in a few specific areas of our lives. Consider it first in the category of time. This is the

most inevitable of all inevitable things. The clock keeps on ticking; the calendar keeps on turning; time keeps on passing whether we like it or not. We are all getting older whether we want to or not. And if we live long enough, someday we will all get old. Our bodies will yield to the ravages of time. In this we have no choice. It is obligatory. Our only option is how we handle it. We can approach it with a first-mile spirit, resenting and resisting it every step of the way. We can lie about our age. We can dig in our heels and pretend that we will be young forever. Of course, that will not change anything. Time will keep right on marching and dragging us along with it. We will still get old, and there is a good possibility that we will also become bitter as well.

On the other hand we could walk with time in the spirit of the second mile. We could make friends with it. We could enjoy every stage of the journey. We could recognize that time not only destroys our physical strength, but also has the power to enlarge our minds and enrich our lives. We will, of course, still get old; but we will not go sour. Since we have to walk with time, the only thing that can save our souls from bitterness is the voluntary spirit of the second mile.

Consider this principle next as it applies to our work. Most of us have to do some kind of work whether we want to or not. If nothing else, it's an economic necessity. There are bills to pay; there are groceries to buy. And many of you have dependents who are counting on you for food, clothing, and shelter; so work is a must. Sunday night you set the alarm,

and Monday morning you get up and go to work. But this obligation can be faced in one of two ways. We can go to our jobs like slaves. Once there, we can badly perform only the bare requirements. We can keep one eye on the clock, resenting every minute, and eagerly anticipating the end of the day. Then we can drag ourselves home, dreading the hour when we must start the whole sorry process over again. That is one way of facing the necessity of work and thousands of people do it every day. But there is a better way. We can learn to think of our work, not as a punishment, but as a privilege. Whatever it is, however boring it may seem, we can do it to the best of our ability. We can look for little ways to do a little more than is required. We can be kind and polite to our co-workers. We can recognize that all honest work is the business of God, and we can cooperate with him in the building of his world.

You can smile at that if you like, but I promise you this: Such a spirit surely makes the day a lot shorter and the work load a good bit lighter. The first mile alone is work. The fun begins on the second mile.

Finally, let us think of this principal as it applies to our homes. To belong to a family is to be bound by certain minimum obligations. If a man is to function as a husband and father, there are certain things that he must do, certain responsibilities that he must accept. The same can be said of a wife and mother. And on another level, the same holds true for children. And there are households where these minimum requirements mark the outer limits of family life. Each member does just as much as

he has to do and no more. They live by the spirit of the first mile, and they end up with a first-mile home. This is, I suppose, better than nothing, but it is a pretty poor excuse for family life.

Real homes are always built in the second mile. It is the unnecessary courtesy, the unexpected gift, the unsolicited thoughtfulness that makes husbands and wives into lovers and friends. It is the listening ear, the understanding heart, the fair discipline, the gentle encouragement, the honest apology, the wholehearted forgiveness that forges bonds of trust between parents and children. And those things cannot be force; they can only be given. You will not find them anywhere but in the second mile.

In this world, there are few things more pathetic than a first-mile family, where each member lives by the law of minimum requirement. But one of the most beautiful sights on the face of the earth is a second-mile family, where people do and give more than they have to just because they choose to.

Jesus said, "Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles." Where are we living our lives? The first mile or the second? In the minimum of the obligatory or in the abundant flow of the voluntary? **Amen.**