

Core Values: Baseball, Parrots, and a Screaming Baby
June 26, 2022

I'd like to share a few stories with you this morning/afternoon. They are short stories about my own life, and if I'm being honest, they are not grand tales of suspense and intrigue, but they are significant stories.

The first experience I'd like to share took place when I was maybe 10 or 11 years old. I was an avid baseball player in the summers at that age. There was one Little League game in particular, though, that nothing seemed to go my way. I didn't get a hit. I flubbed a play in the field. It was one of those days when it felt like you couldn't do anything right. Just not my day.

After the game, I rode home in the car with my dad, feeling glum and beating myself up a little bit. And my dad could see where I was emotionally. My dad shared a word of advice that he often shared in situations like this. He started off by asking, "Did you try your hardest today?" I responded that I did, in fact, play my hardest, but it still wasn't very good. He responded, "That's all you can do. You do your best, and the heck with it."

I heard that piece of wisdom several times over the course of my childhood, after a lousy soccer game or a poor showing on a spelling test. And obviously, it has stuck with me over the years. "You do your best, and the heck with it." That's the first story I'd like to share with you today.

The second story takes place when I was in seminary. Before you can be ordained, you have to serve as a chaplain, usually in a hospital setting. And so there was a summer before my final year of seminary when I worked as a hospital chaplain, serving in a couple different wings in the building. One of my units that I was assigned to patrol was a psychiatric ward. One of the first patients I ever visited was a cold call. I had asked some of the nurses if any of the patients might appreciate a visit (since the nurses knew the patients well), and they sent me to the room of a man who had undergone pretty intense treatment for depression. I have to say, I was scared to go to his room, not because I had any concerns about my safety, but simply because I didn't know what to say.

Eventually, I worked up enough courage to knock on the door of his room, and he invited me in. We made conversation, and I asked about his life. He gave mostly one-word answers.

As some point, the conversation lulled. I had run out of questions to ask. The patient took the moment of silence to ask me a question. He pointed at the wall above my head and said, "Do you like my parrots?" I thought I misheard him, so I looked up, and there were a coloring sheet with a picture of two parrots, painstakingly colored in crayon. It was clear that this man was proud of his artwork. And I told him that I did indeed like his parrots.

It was a short moment that still touches me. That interaction illustrates a truth that I found again and again with every hospital patient, a truth that I still believe with my whole heart. Everyone has a story. And what makes us human is those opportunities to share our stories with another person, and to listen. To tell how proud we are of a piece of artwork that we've made, or an

accomplishment we had that day, or talk about the difficulty we're going through. No one should ever find themselves in a position where they can't tell their experience.

The final story I'd like to share with you takes place more recently, about a year ago. Many of you know that I have a little daughter named Cora. I'm going to be honest with you today. When Cora was born, I was unimpressed. In that delivery room, she was loud; she was not particularly cute. She was needy. I was not particularly fond of Cora when she was born.

But she grew on me. And I have to tell you, a turning point in our relationship was when Cora began to smile at my wife Becca or me. And when she laughed for the first time... I'll tell you, there is no symphony or concerto that is more pleasing to the ears than the sound of your child's laughter. It was indescribably beautiful, and it made me overflow with love for Cora.

I share these stories with you because they have shaped me. Last month, I was at a clergy conference, and one of the exercises that we were asked to complete was to consider, "What are our core values?" And to help us think about that, we were encouraged to think about our memories from growing up or in our current families that have shaped our priorities. And these stories I've just shared with you were some of the memories that came up for me, that have shaped my core values, the deepest convictions I hold.

From my dad's wisdom after the baseball game, the value conveyed was affirmation, hard work, and perseverance, without emphasizing a result.

From my time as a chaplain, the values that arose were the sacredness of every life and story; compassion; relationship; authenticity.

From Cora, the values were joy; love of family; wonder at the world.

And so at this conference, we compiled these core values, and we thought about our future, and how we want to make sure that these core values are incorporated into the various realms of our lives (work life, family life, civic life).

My core values ended up being affirmation, perseverance, belonging, family, authenticity, justice, living life fully, peace (both inner and outer), joy, and wonder.

That's a lot of very heady words. And they are meaningful to me, but they might not be to you. So I'd like to invite you to think for a few seconds about what your core values are? What do you hold true to, at the core of your being? And if that's too arduous to think about, then consider: What experiences have been formative in shaping who you are and what you value? What did your parents, siblings, relatives, coaches, or mentors teach you were important?

Do you have one or two core values that you learned from a loved parent or mentor? Hold on to that. Think about it later today. Talk about it at dinner.

We have a list of core values that Paul wrote about, which we hear today. He calls them "the fruit of the spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." To be honest, when we hear those, we can start to tune out. We say, "Right, all those good qualities."

What Paul is saying is that these are the core values of the Christian faith. To love; to be generous; to be patient and kind. This is not an exhaustive list, though. I'd encourage you to add your own core values to this list. I imagine that you have some pretty important and pretty admirable qualities that you value and would add.

Jesus also has some core values to add. See, Paul likes to write and think and expound on things. Jesus likes to do stuff. He teaches through action and by telling stories. So today, we hear about some of Jesus' core values, but he doesn't wax poetic like Paul; he lives out his values.

For example, Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem. He knows he is going to the cross, and even though he is not excited about his fate, he still moves towards it. Core value: doing what is right, even when it is difficult.

On his travels with his disciples, Jesus encounters some rudeness and a lack of hospitality. That's no small potatoes; to be refused hospitality was a pretty serious offense in Jesus' day. Two of Jesus' disciples, though, take the rudeness to heart a bit too much. They offer to call down God's wrath on these people. You can almost imagine Jesus face-palming and saying, "Is that really what you think I would ask you to do?" Core value: Don't return meanness for meanness, and correct people (lovingly) when they mess up.

And finally, we hear a few sayings of Jesus about commitment. They all boil down to, "If you want to follow me, you must leave your family obligations behind." Jesus gives this image of putting a hand to the plow and not looking back. The idea is that if you are plowing a field with a horse or donkey or ox, you try to plow in straight lines. If you look back to make sure you are moving straight, you inevitably veer to one side, thus ruining the process. So you must keep your eyes ahead.

The core value here: "Your faith and commitment to Jesus must come first."

Today, we hear and consider our core values. I hope, speaking as your priest, that your faith makes it into your core values. And maybe that happens explicitly (i.e. "faith is essential"), or maybe it happens implicitly, in living with love and honesty and forgiveness and truth. Either way, we are called to imitate Christ, and to love and serve Christ in all people, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.