

JUNKYARDS AND JESUS

Everyone here realizes, I'm sure, that you've come to an ordination. Everyone here realizes that this service marks an important milestone, a beginning point in Aaron's life. What you may not have realized is that this service also marks another milestone, another beginning, for later in this service we will baptize Aaron and AnDrea's first born child, Isaiah. And as they take their vows they will commit themselves to the task of Christian parenting.

Aaron and AnDrea may have already discovered that one of the great joys of parenting is reading aloud. There are so many wonderful books for young children, filled with delightful stories and colorful pictures. Isaiah will, no doubt, have his own favorites. There will be certain books he will want read over and over and over again. And when he gets a bit older, if he is like many children I know, he will grow to love the poetry of Shel Silverstein.

Silverstein's poems are liberally laced with the absurdities that seem to delight all children. They have titles like "Hungry Mungr", "Dirtiest Man in the World" and "Recipe for a Hippopotamus Sandwich." But often there is also a sensitive side to Silverstein. Some of his poems deal very effectively with childhood issues like fear of the dark and difficult teachers.

Many of his poems include long lists. One of the best of those is "Hector the Collector":

Hector the Collector
Collected bits of string
Collected dolls with broken heads
And rusty bells that would not ring.
Pieces out of picture puzzles
Bent-up nails and ice cream sticks,
Twists of wires, worn out ties
Paper bags and broken bricks
Old chipped vases, half shoelaces,
Gatlin' guns that wouldn't shoot,
Leaky boats that wouldn't float
And stopped up horns that wouldn't toot.
Butter knives that had no handles,
Copper keys that fit no locks,
Rings that were too small for fingers,
Dried up leaves and patched up socks.
Worn-out belts that had no buckles,
'Lectric trains that had no tracks,
Airplane models, broken bottles,
Three-legged chairs and cups with cracks.

Hector the Collector
Loved these things with all his soul—
Loved them more than shining diamonds,
Loved them more than glistenin' gold.
Hector called to all the people,
"Come and share my treasure trunk!"
And all the silly, sightless people
Came and looked . . . and called it junk."
(Where the Sidewalk Ends, 46-47)

I once met a real life Hector. His name was Bardell. He must have had a first name, but I don't know what it was. Even his wife called him Bardell. He was a bit rough-hewn. He told me he only shaved on Sundays. The suspenders he was wearing were festooned with pictures of red toy soldiers and clashed with his striped shirt. And one of his shoes was held together by black electrician's tape. He was probably about sixty when I met him.

Bardell had what I would call a very God-like view of life. Like Hector, Bardell saw grand possibilities, even in the midst of a junkyard.

He lived in a huge old barn of a house that he and his wife were gradually transforming into a regular palace of visual delights. As you entered the place, the first thing you saw was his miniature ice-cream parlor. Bardell made ten flavors, and always liberally passed around samples. His freezer was rescued from a junk heap. And even the ice cream itself reflected his ability to turn trash into treasures. Each batch of his teaberry ice cream—a western Pennsylvania favorite—was made with five drops of flavoring from a gallon jug of the stuff he'd bought forty years earlier for \$5.00 from some guy who was going to pour it down the drain.

If you continued your tour of the house, you'd find, side by side, brightly colored rooms and subtly shaded hallways. And at every turn some piece of furniture or building material with a story. The kitchen floor was made up of mismatched pieces of wood that sat on a pallet in the back of a warehouse for two years because nobody wanted them. But Bardell saw potential, and used them to create a masterpiece. In one corner of the same room sat an old barber's chair—at one time ready for the scrap pile—but Bardell rescued it, and gave it to his daughter who used to give all the neighborhood children haircuts—right there in the kitchen. His wife's jewelry armoire? A brightly repainted dentist's tool chest. And the list was endless.

How sad that so few people could see what Hector saw in his collection! How sad that so few folks have the vision of Bardell. But isn't that generally true in this world of ours? Isn't it true that we rarely see below the surface, that we make snap judgments? Despite aphorisms to the contrary, we often judge a book by its cover. But things aren't always what they appear to be—as we are reminded in our passage from I Corinthians.

We need to remember that the Corinthian church that this letter is addressed to was a real rag-tag bunch of people. They were hardly what one would consider likely candidates for doing the will of God! Many of them were slaves, some may have been prostitutes, they came from the dregs of Corinthian society. None of them were in positions of power or prestige. But Paul, like Hector, saw real potential. For he saw them through God's eyes. For, as Paul wrote, "the Spirit searches everything." (2:10b) And while the world must have assessed the Corinthian congregation as a collection of real losers, as the refuse of society, as nothing more than poor Greek trash, Paul saw them as men and women who were children of God. And therefore, as people with potential.

Paul, of course, was simply following the lead of Jesus. For throughout his ministry Jesus was always being accused of hanging around with the riff-raff. He went to parties with prostitutes. He had dinner with tax collectors. He spent time talking to women who'd been caught in adultery. One of his closest friends had been possessed by demons. Time and again, Jesus reached out to those society had discarded. Where some saw trash, he saw treasure! And sisters and brothers, as followers of Jesus we are called to do the same. You and I are called us to see beyond the standards of the world. Yes, we are to base our faith and our actions on wisdom, says Paul, "but not the wisdom of this age or its rulers . . . but God's wisdom, secret and hidden . . ." (2:6)

We are here today to ordain Aaron Peter James. And with his ordination will come a new set of responsibilities. A new set of privileges. He will have the joy of administering the sacraments. He will preach the word, and teach the truths of the faith. He will represent the church in hospital sickrooms and at deathbeds and even, perhaps, in prison visiting rooms. He will lend a pastoral voice to conversations about church business.

There will be many tasks and duties that will become a part of his daily life. But none more important, I would suggest, than helping others to see the world like Hector or Bardell or Paul. For this world of ours is far too quick to consign people to the junk yard. And we human beings need all the reminders we can get, that in God's sight, all are precious. In God's sight, all are counted as treasure. And a pastor needs to say it over and over and over again, in word and in deed.

Pastor Mark Ralls, in a recent article, recalls a passage in the book Calvin Trillin wrote about his wife Alice. At one point in her life Alice volunteered at a summer camp for terminally ill children. One of the little girl's in her care, who we'll call Louise, was severely disabled. She was the sort of child many people would write off. But little Louise moved through life with great courage and a real measure of optimism. "One day," writes Rawls, "while [Louise] was absorbed in a game of Duck, Duck, Goose, Alice spotted a letter that [her] parent's had written [Louise]. She could not resist reading the first few lines. 'If God had given us all the children in the world to choose from, [Louise], we would have chosen you.'" Alice passed the note to a fellow counselor, whispering breathlessly, 'Quick. Read this. It's the secret of life.'" ("Mindful," *Christian Century*, 5-15-07, 17)

And so it is. The secret of life, and the secret of being good parents—as I know Aaron and AnDrea will be. It is also the secret to being a good pastor. For, Aaron, being a good pastor means constantly reminding those in your care that God does indeed see beneath the surface. It means helping folks realize that God’s wisdom is not that of this world. That what others label as trash, God sees as grand and glorious treasure. It means sharing the good news that every woman and man, every boy and girl, is chosen by God. Black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, able-bodied or not—each and everyone is chosen, *chosen*, by God, and deemed precious in God’s sight. And telling that truth is what it means to be a good pastor.

It means having the eyes of Hector or Bardell, of St. Paul or Louise’s parents. It means having the eyes of God.

Amen
John H. Danner