

I wrote this sermon while on retreat. Not in a monastery or on a mountain top. This retreat is in my basement, where I “retreat” from the television set. My wife and I have had a wonderful marriage of over 30 years, but she enjoys serial watching crime dramas, where people do unimaginably horrible things to each other episode after episode, at full volume! So, I go “on retreat”. You know, she was a guidance counselor prior to retirement. There must be some sort of correlation there.

My basement, however, is a nice place and in it I sometimes find inspiration. This time, inspiration was found in my space atlas. I have always been fascinated by the wonder of creation, especially in the vastness of space, from the planets and moons orbiting our own sun out to the Milky Way and beyond. What caught my attention this time was Europa, one of great Jupiter's moons located in the icy reaches beyond the asteroid belt. In fact, Europa is a big ball of ice, almost as large as our own moon. It is also COLD, with a surface temperature somewhere around 350 degrees below zero! Pictures taken by unmanned spacecraft reveal a moon that appears still and lifeless, which makes sense given the location. The reality is different. Sometimes, a giant crack appears in the thick crust of ice surrounding Europa, and a hot geyser of scalding water erupts into space (where it promptly freezes). It means that powerful forces are at work on the interior of that moon, forces so strong that 100 miles of ice cannot contain the heat. It has nowhere to go and nothing to do but break through that impassive, thick skin of ice and explode into space.

I think people are like that, too. We try to “hold it together” in our personal, professional, and faithful lives. Generally speaking, we do a pretty good job. However, there are times when the forces acting upon us in modern life, forces that are much more complex and difficult to name than the intense gravity of Jupiter affecting Europa, cause us to “erupt”. We heat up from the inside out, we can't contain ourselves, and a form of “eruption” shatters our exterior calm.

Not all of these eruptions are bad! Great advances in every field of endeavor, the natural sciences, the humanities, any form of artistic expression, even athletics, occur because our interior passion, our heat, can be harnessed to accomplish great things. (I'm not sure how I feel about this, but we are sending Captain Kirk into space). The other side of the coin, however, includes the darker forces that affect us, many of which we unleash on each other. These forces can yield very harmful consequences.

I think of our youth. What is it like to be young today? What is it like to be young – still figuring out who you are and how you are going to confront this task of growing up? Every day, from every direction, you are bombarded with a confusing mixture of misinformation and disinformation that can be so difficult to sort out. On top of that, in a culture that idolizes wealth and success, you are trying to achieve in all the necessary areas – academic – athletic – artistic – social – that lead to a “perfect life.” Our youth are trying to “hold it all together” just like us. Think of the proud teenage boy who tries to look strong. Think of all the images posted on Facebook or Instagram that show nothing but happiness and joy. The reality is sometimes very different. Sometimes we find out quite abruptly how different the reality can be.

There are more children and adolescents on anxiety medication than ever before. Depression, mental illness, violence against others, and tragically, self-harm, is on the rise. I have had athletes, some of the most outwardly happy and wholesome kids you would ever want to meet, break down in tears

before my eyes. Perhaps I should say “erupt” into tears. Stresses and strains are churning them up from the inside out. Sooner or later, something has to give. The shell - “the skin” - containing all of this heat bursts apart. Fear of not getting into the “right” school. Fear of not being good enough. Fear of letting everyone down. Fear of losing a scholarship or not being awarded one in the first place. Fears they can’t even name.

There is a transition taking place in our youth that seems to be happening at an earlier age than it used to in a “simpler time.” It happens when the sheer pleasure, the sheer joy, of doing something is overtaken by the expectation of reward. The joy of learning becomes secondary to getting the grades necessary to go to the school or graduate school of your dreams. The joy of swimming or hitting “nothing but net” in basketball is secondary to achieving an athletic scholarship. So, you have travel teams, adult organization, and less free play than in generations past.

In today’s gospel reading Jesus has to “tell off” two disciples, James and John, in part because of this kind of thinking. After all is said and done, they wanted to be seated right next to Jesus in glory. They wanted the reward! They wanted to be placed above everyone else. So, Jesus has to explain to them that this is the type of hierarchal thinking that causes trouble in the first place. In the first century of the common era, Roman rule was unyielding and oppressive. Troublemakers were crucified. There were a few very ostentatiously wealthy people and everyone else survived at or near a subsistence level. What Jesus was telling James and John in no uncertain terms, was that this focus on reward, of clawing your way to the top, would guarantee that the children and youth of generations to come would create a society no different than the one in which they lived. They would repeat the mistakes of their fathers. Nothing would change.

It’s not entirely clear whether the other disciples were angry with James and John because they understood the error of their ways or because they wanted a chance to be seated right next to Jesus in glory. I think you have to give the disciples a break. They eventually get it, but they were still sorting out just who Jesus was. He was called teacher, prophet, Messiah, Son of Man, and Son of God. Every Jewish person believed that the Messiah would be a great political and military figure who would, if you’ll pardon the expression, “Make Israel great again.” To understand the radically different nature of Jesus’ “revolution” would take some time.

And what was, and is, the nature of that ministry? It was, and is, to treat everyone we meet as equal in the eyes of God. It is to share our gifts joyfully, to experience creation without being overburdened by the expectation of reward. That was hard to take back in Jesus’ day, in the face of Roman oppression, in a society where practically everyone wondered where their next meal was coming from. It’s still hard to grasp today. We still worship wealth, status, and success. Or rather, we elevate wealth, status, and success sometimes to the level of worship. And we can feel that pressure at a tender young age.

Diana Butler Bass said that to her, “religion is a sacred journey to someplace better.” Yes! It’s not a pressure statement. It’s open ended. It isn’t how much better. Every good act counts. It doesn’t feature a point scale where some acts are better than others. There’s no pressure to “rise to the top.” It points to God and understands that everything we do in God’s name has equal value. And for our children and grandchildren, for the generations to come, I pray that through our example, the belief that God values everything we do in His name, both great and small, is foremost in their hearts.