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And Things Left Undone

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

Occasionally, something really sticks with me. In our confession of sin, we pray for forgiveness for both the things we have done and the things we have left undone:

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone. (Book of Common Prayer, p. 352)

It is the second half of that sentence which I cannot get out of my mind. In fact, it has haunted me for years. What exactly are the things I have left undone?

Sure, I must stop and get milk on my way home from church. I also need to mail a birthday card, and yes, I've got to get a live person at Google on the line tomorrow to reset my password. But I don't think this is what Thomas

Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had in mind when he wrote the Book of Common Prayer in 1549.

Nor do I think he is referring to our bucket list, the things we want to do before it's too late. This is not about catching the sunrise from the top of Mount Fuji or running with the bulls in Pamplona. It is not about going over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist theologian, philosopher, and prolific writer who influenced 20th century Protestant thinking, laid out a scheme involving life's three stages of existence. We start out in the aesthetic stage where our focus is on ourselves. What do we find beautiful? What stimulates our imagination?

Some of us might progress to the next stage, the ethical life. Here our focus is in on the other. We welcome the stranger, we protect the widow and orphan, we care for the sick and the poor.

A very few of us might go on to the highest stage, the truly religious life. Here our focus is on our relation to God. At this stage, we are called to fulfill our ultimate role here on earth – to be bearers of the image of God and all that implies.

Several years ago, David Brooks, a columnist for the *New York Times*, published *The Road to Character*. In it he talks about our moral bucket list and makes a distinction between resumé virtues and eulogy virtues.

The first is obviously a list of accomplishments in our education and our profession. On the other hand, the eulogy virtues are the things someone is willing to stand up and talk about at our funeral. And here Brooks is getting at what Cranmer wrote so poetically – “by what we have left undone.”

I recently learned that Brooks, raised a secular Jew, now attends a non-denominational church with his Christian wife. I've long admired how he publicly wrestles with the great ethical issues of our times. It is clear to me he has been living in that second of Kierkegaard's stages. And it's wonderful to see that he is making his way onto that even higher stage, the truly religious life.

Now let's be honest. There's nothing wrong with the aesthetic life. In fact, if we accept Kierkegaard's scheme, most of us spend most of our time here. Pursuing beauty in art, or music, or nature is an important part of life. Developing deep and lasting relations with other people because we are attracted by their beauty, whether physical or spiritual, is what gives depth and texture to our lives.

Similarly, there is nothing wrong with serving others. This is, after all, the second half of the Great Commandment:

'... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these (Mark 12:30-31).

We as Christians are called to serve the other. It is what we do as individuals. It is what we do in our parish, in our community, and in the wider world.

Yet at the end of the day, when we pray for forgiveness for things left undone, for what exactly are we praying? Yes, I should have taken time to slow down and appreciate life. And yes, I should have offered that homeless woman a few dollars.

However, there is a bigger question. Am I bearing the image of God every day, in everything I do?

The answer is clearly no. And here lie, in my view, most of the things I have left undone. It's a tall order to be always and everywhere a bearer of the image of God. In fact, it is so tall that we can never measure up. And that's precisely why every Sunday we once again must ask forgiveness for the things left undone.

So, enjoy that sunset. You may never see another so beautiful. And be thoughtful and kind, especially to the poor and the lonely. But remember, in everything we do, we are called to be bearers of the image of God. And when we fall short, which we frequently do, pray for forgiveness. Our God is a forgiving God. Our God is a loving God.