

Pack Your Homilies with Life

by

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Donald Miller's book *A Thousand Miles in a Million Years* (Thomas Nelson, Inc.) chronicles a film company's attempt to instill a sense of drama into Miller's sedentary life. The unusual project forces Miller to reassess the impact of his life on others. So he decides to get off the couch, switch off the TV, and embark on a personal quest that includes a cross-country bike excursion.

The most intriguing insights he gleans from his trip are drawn from scenes in the lives of ordinary people in everyday circumstances: a father sets work aside for a homecoming photo with his daughter; a young girl dances in an open field of wheat; a man guns his truck to the top of a hill to watch an ocean sunset.

Storytelling changes reality

According to Miller, the effort to construct unforgettable scenes helps create meaning in one's life. To support his argument, he cites God's directives in the Old Testament to build altars to mark places of significant epiphanies.

Miller's conclusion: "We have to blow up the inner-tubes and head for the river....We have to put on our suits, we have to dance at the weddings. We have to make altars" (p. 214).

Ordinary places, extraordinary scenes

The role of the homilist is similar to that of a screenwriter insofar as it involves a search for scenes of grace. If life's meaning is crystallized in memorable scenes, then the highlighting of grace also requires a more-than-sedentary approach to preaching.

When the homilist sets out to "erect an altar," the linguistic endeavor consists of weaving the good news into unforgettable scenes. In other words, when "shooting a scene" for a homily, edit out water-cooler conversation and insert life-saving shouts across white water rapids.

Extraordinary sacrifice

The only stories worth telling are those in which something important is at stake. Miller reminds us, is the sacrifice of everything. Therefore, if bearing the cross of Christ is a life-or-death ordeal, effective preaching requires potent scenes that portray the gritty challenge of faith.

The message of an excellent film lingers through the roll of the credits. So, too, the power of a homily must reverberate through the offering of the eucharistic sacrifice.

MAKE A SCENE: A BLESSING FOR THE HANDS THAT FEED US

The following homily excerpt illustrates the use of "scene-making" organization and language

M

ike waved at me from atop a one-million-bushel mountain of corn. He and five other men were attempting to pull a gigantic tarp across the enormous pile of grain just outside Liberal, Kansas.

I gawked from below. Up above, the workers strained their backs, heaved their chests, and glanced at the bank of clouds in the west.

“Hold her down!” Mike yelled.

Too late. A gust of wind caught the edge of the tarp and flipped it halfway up the mountain of corn. Five men spread-eagled themselves across the canvas which huffed and gasped like a dying animal. A second gust and three of the men went airborne, disappearing over the crest. The canvas, ripped from its moorings, flapped across the Kansas sky like an army of monkeys from Oz.

Later that night, Mike looked tired as he passed me a bowl of potatoes, his knuckles raw from his tug-of-war with the tarp. I took the bowl. His chaffed skin called to mind the countless hands stained with grease, rough and calloused on which I’ve placed the Body of Christ at Sunday Mass.

I bowed my head and thanked God for more than the food.