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Born to See; Meant to Look

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ServiceMaster Clean Convention
Memphis TN
July 13, 2011

C. William Pollard

“Born to See; Meant to Look”

I am delighted to be with you today. It has been special for me to visit with some of my old friends and see the continued spirit and vitality of the ServiceMaster Clean business.

As we come together this morning to begin this day with a time of prayer, we are recognizing that as we pray there is a God to Whom we pray.

The title of my talk “Born to See; Meant to Look” raises the question of what role, if any, does God play in the way we live our lives. Is there a purpose and meaning for life? As we spend the days of our life at work or with our families, or enjoying sports and entertainment, vacations and travel, what does it all add up to?

The phrase Born to See; Meant to Look comes from an ancient German legend, later turned into a play and then an opera in the early 19th century. It’s about a man named Faust. Faust was a brilliant person bent on discovering “all” of what life was about. Frustrated with the limits of what he could experience by exploring knowledge, he made a bargain with the devil to sell his soul in return for the opportunity to

experience all of the “pleasures” of life. It’s a sad story with a profound message -- a reminder for all of us that this life of ours, as we live it, is adding up to something and that our existence does not end with death.

Now there is much about our lives for which we should be thankful. Yes, the economy could be better, unemployment rates are still too high, the housing market continues to be depressed, and our leaders in Washington can’t seem to agree upon much, other than blaming each other for what is not happening. Yet the reality of our life is that we are still enjoying an overall standard of living that surpasses any previous generation. So how should we then live?

As I ask myself this question, I realize that, at my age, most of my life is behind me. Looking back, the lessons, experiences, and choices of life are often better understood than when you are going through them and seeking to look forward.

Some of the most meaningful lessons of life, for me, have occurred during my working years at ServiceMaster. Our company objectives -- to honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence or, as we phrase it now, to excel with customers, and to grow profitably -- provide a framework for a culture that raises the important questions of life, the meaning and purpose of our work, and our responsibility as leaders to be about the development and care of those we lead -- to have a concern

not just about what people do in their work but also about the person they are becoming.

It was a culture that kept reminding me to be “other” oriented regardless of the title or position I held. It is this principle of leadership that Jesus was teaching His disciples as He washed their feet, namely, that no leader was greater or had a self interest more important than those being led.

Servant leadership was and continues to be a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I joined ServiceMaster, now almost 35 years ago. Before coming to ServiceMaster, I had practiced law for eight years and served five years in the administration and on the faculty at Wheaton College.

As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited by Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of ServiceMaster and Ken Wessner, who was the President and CEO of the company, to consider joining the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

During the recruiting process, the two Kens shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen's office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I decided to press the two Kens to be more specific about what they had inferred.

So I started asking Ken Hansen on what needed to be done and how long it would take for me to be considered for being President and CEO of this Company. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken Hansen stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: "Bill, the interview is over."

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I'd blown my opportunity and it was probably God's way of directing me back to the practice of law.

Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken's words to me that morning were simply put this way: "Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you'd better forget it."

Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. There were lessons for me to learn, including that the people being led came first and never give a title or position to somebody who can't live without it.

And as I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken decided to test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a corporate vice president, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks we perform for our customers. In so doing, I was learning the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

This experience often reminded me of my own imperfections and the need to admit my mistakes and ask for forgiveness and seek guidance from above. It also taught me that it would be wrong to use my leadership to impose my faith on others or treat people differently because they didn't believe the way I did. There would be times when I could share my faith, but it needed to be done within the context of how people saw me live my faith.

That standard had been set long before me by the founder of our Company, Marion Wade, when he said: "If you don't live it you don't believe it."

For him, there was no room to live a bifurcated life – church on Sunday and work on Monday. Our business was a channel for fulfilling and living his faith. And so it became, for me, a channel that reached as far away as a janitor’s closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace and this Company have provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but who God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

In the world of business, it is our job to provide a quality service to our customers at a profit margin that will generate value for our owners and shareholders. These are the transactions of buying, selling, and serving customers that make a business work. They involve both an offer and acceptance. They require trust and commitment to be implemented and they start with a decision and end with a result. If we don’t want to play by these rules, we don’t belong in the ballgame.

But then how do God and business mix? How do I bring my faith to my work on Monday? For me as a Christian, it has something to do with the fact that my faith has also involved a transaction – a transaction not with a customer or a shareholder but with God – a transaction that involved God’s offer and my acceptance and has required trust and a continuing commitment for implementation.

Some use the biblical term "born again" to refer to this point of commitment. It is a spiritual rebirth.

This term comes from the story told in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. A young man came to visit Jesus. He was a business person. In fact, he was described as being wealthy. His basic questions of Jesus were: How do I find God? How do I develop a purpose and meaning for life? How do I know that I will go to heaven and be with God when I die?

Jesus responded by saying that the young man had to be "born again"; not a physical rebirth, but a spiritual rebirth. His sin had separated him from God. Through Jesus, God was making an offer of forgiveness to all who would believe. But for this offer of forgiveness to be effective, it had to be accepted. It required trust and commitment and it could not become a completed transaction unless there was a positive response, a decision by this young man to be a follower of Christ. A decision that would result in a new beginning – a spiritual rebirth.

For me, this transaction with God has not only affected the way I should relate to my work and the people with whom I work but also has affected my relationships with my family. It is His standard that I love and cherish my wife. I am not the superior. She is not the subordinate. It is not my checkbook, my house, my way. We have become a partnership that is based upon mutual love and trust. Judy and I are

committed to each other and, after more than 50 years of marriage, we are still working at the joining together of our separate and distinct personalities. It requires a constant attention to the smoothing of the rough edges. There is always a hope for something more in our marriage.

The single most important product of this love and trust is the children God has given us. Our role was to provide a home for their development, spiritual nurture, and admonition. This role changed with their growth and maturity, marriage, and the birth and development of their children, now our grandchildren.

For me, life has also had those times of doubt and despair, including during some difficult teenage years and the sudden death of my father when I was 18. There followed the challenges of college and law school and seeking to establish a home and support a family and finance an education. At times, there were feelings of inadequacy and concerns about whether I would ever measure up.

There developed a drive for success which allowed my law profession to become a jealous mistress in my life, only to be stopped by God's intervention with a serious health condition. There followed a dramatic change in my life. I left the practice of law and came to serve as an administrator and faculty member at Wheaton College and then in 1977 I joined the ServiceMaster team.

So you see, my life has not been a simple, logical, predictable sequence of events. God has used many different people and circumstances to develop and mold me. There are not answers to every question. In fact, in this growing relationship with God, I have found that His way is not always my way.

Here give story of Ben.

It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us that there are no ordinary people. We have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, but it is "immortals" who we joke with, marry, snub and exploit.

In a pluralistic society, in a world where there is freedom to choose, not everyone will agree with my starting point or the need for personal faith in God, but for me this is where I get my direction - my anchor in the wind of change and choice – my purpose and meaning for work and life – my source for a standard of right and wrong.

As we come here to pray today, the question before each of us is: Who are we praying to, and what is our relationship to Him? As business people so accustomed to making transactions to serve customers and make money, are we ready to make a transaction with God?

Born to See; Meant to Look – as we look to God this morning and consider the alternatives – what decisions for life will we make? Will they include a decision for God?

* * * *

Revised 7/21/11