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The Baby and the Bathwater

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The Baby and the Bathwater

We are familiar with the saying, "Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater." Whether or not we can identify the rule of logic that is involved, we can apply the statement to many real situations in our lives. The bathwater gets dirty and should be put down the drain; the person who was cleansed in that water is of eternal value. President or Pope, faculty or staff, child or adult, we all have strengths and weaknesses; we do some things well, some poorly; we follow inspirations in making appropriate choices, and accept influences that lead to actions that are less worthy of us. Some of our actions or inactions should be thrown away; No one of us should be treated as bathwater.

When someone hurts us or acts contrary to our values, we can make the erroneous judgment that the person is worthless, rather than their behavior. Pain and anger can influence our thinking. The teen who says to a parent "I hate you" after having received some minor correction speaks more from emotion than reason. But mature adults sometimes err by making judgments that "those people are all terrorists" or "they are liberals" or "all of them are conservative." Science and statistics use summaries of many individual instances to arrive at reasonable general projections. But the value and worth of humans, with our capabilities for acting with and against societal norms, cannot be generalized other than by the illogic and error of "throwing out the baby with the bathwater."

Prejudice relies on generalizations to work its destructive power. Someone who is "different" by culture, ethnicity, or religion has perhaps acted contrary to civil law, our customs, or broadly held values. We might decide that all people who are of that culture, ethnic group, or religious belief will act the same way. Or that if one errs significantly, all will act the same way. One person is declared "bad," as well as all who bear similar characteristics. Prejudicial thinking fails both logic and love at two levels: judging another human wholly and entirely by some particular words or deeds, and judging all similar humans as being "dirty bathwater" to be thrown aside as worthless. We are well aware that prejudice led to lynching and witch-burning in the past, and to declaring individuals and classes of persons as worthy of death in our own times.

Judging an individual or a group of people as incapable of wrong-doing is another form of prejudice, and diminishes the unity that is our rightful heritage as daughters and sons of God. If we revere an

authority figure, we might want him or her to be like a "savior," always right, always doing the better thing. We might decide that they can do no wrong, and refuse to acknowledge even one shortcoming. Do we have a sink full of water with a baby, and the water stays completely clean? Of course we tend to overlook the obvious faults and failings of those we love, and receive the same positive consideration of others. But if we pre-judge as correct and good all the words and actions of some persons in authority, we fail to respect their humanity. We make them into gods who are not like us, doing them a great disservice and setting aside both our honesty and the exercise of our consciences.

Only God is God, capable of fair and just judgment of every person. And God, as Love, is also merciful. All of us stand in need of the undeserved gift of mercy, because none of us is perfect. Before God, we all are in need of a cleansing bath. We trust in the parenting love of God that we will not be thrown out with the bathwater.