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What's Christian About Housework?

I have always enjoyed keeping house. From my earliest childhood I wanted to cook, so my mother taught me how. The first thing I learned to make was oatmeal. The second was macaroni and cheese, with a sauce that sometimes involved a can of condensed cream of mushroom soup (I liked it that way) and sometimes didn't (the rest of the family preferred it without).

I don't remember wanting to learn to do the laundry, but my mother taught me (and my brothers and sister) to do that, too: sorting, washing, drying, folding, ironing. One of my brothers got so good at folding that when he was in college, little old ladies would gather around him at the laundromat for the pleasure of watching him fold his shirts.

My mother wasn't much on cleaning, so I mostly figured that out on my own. Perhaps this relatively late start on the cleaning front is why I have never attained (or, truth be told, aspired to) any particularly high standard of cleanliness. But by the time I was in my late twenties, I had spent years rather happily keeping house for myself and for other people, aware that this was not very fashionable but not really caring,

because I liked it and on some level sensed the value of it, even if I didn't think about it very deeply.

My adventures in housework became more intense, however, during the years of my first marriage. I married my first husband at the end of my first year in graduate school and buried him four years later, at the beginning of my sixth year. Over the intervening years his worsening illness absorbed more and more of my energy, until in the last few months of his life I could do little more than moan to my therapist, "I can't cope; I can't cope; I can hardly get to the grocery store."

I understood then, with a clarity that I have experienced at few other times in my life, that getting to the grocery store was one of the things that Really Mattered. The dissertation could wait; dinner could not. Forget all the abstruse theological ideas that my classmates and teachers seemed to debate with such verve in the graduate seminars I was attending. Forget fantasies of "accomplishing something." Perhaps somewhere in the world there were people who measured their days by how much they got done—at work, in class, wherever. I measured my days by whether, at the end of them, the members of my household had been dressed and fed and bathed and put to bed. If we had been, then that was a good day. I had done what mattered most. Everything else was gravy.

As I moved in subsequent years through widowhood into a second marriage and, eventually, into motherhood, my practice of housekeeping changed to accommodate the changes in my household. But I retained the long-held sense, of which I had been made so consciously aware during those difficult years of illness, that housekeeping—cooking, cleaning, laundry, all the large and small tasks that go into keeping a household humming along—was not a trivial matter but a serious one. People need to eat, to sleep, to have clothes

to wear; they need a place to read, a place to play, a place into which to welcome guests and from which to go forth into the world. These are the needs that housework exists to meet. Good academic and theologian that I was, I wondered, "Where are the books about this? Where are the books that might describe and unpack and explore the significance—both practical and spiritual—of this kind of work?"

I couldn't find many. The more I thought about it, the odder it seemed. After all, Jesus has very strong things to say at various points in the Gospels about the Christian duty to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. He even goes so far, in his parable of the Last Judgment, as to paint this as the criterion by which the sheep are separated from the goats: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me. . . . Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:34–40).

There is a tendency, I think, on the part of those of us who are well fed, clothed, and housed to imagine that the needy people to whom Jesus refers in Matthew 25 are people we don't know—the sort of people who are served at homeless shelters and soup kitchens, at which we ought therefore to volunteer at least occasionally. But housework is all about feeding and clothing and sheltering people who, in the absence of that daily work, would otherwise be hungry and ill-clad and ill-housed.

There is undoubtedly more to the merciful service that Jesus describes in Matthew 25 than caring for the daily needs of the members of our own households. Housework is a beginning, not an end. But it is a beginning—not a sidetrack,

not a distraction, but a beginning, and an essential one at that—in the properly Christian work of, among other things, meeting the everyday needs of others, whether those others be our fellow household members, our near neighbors, or people more sociologically or geographically distant from ourselves.

FANTASIES AND REALITIES

Housekeeping and domestic tasks in general have come to occupy a complex position in American popular culture. Odd as it would have seemed to my grandmother (who was a housewife all her adult life) or to my husband's grandmother (who did all her own housework and cleaned other people's houses for pay besides), housework is these days the subject of a great deal of fantasy. Designer cleaning products and accessories are marketed to high-end consumers who have no intention of cleaning their houses themselves (for that they have maids) but who like to imagine themselves waltzing about in sheer black aprons while wielding feather dusters. Newspapers bring us columns on fashion that feature haute couture–clad models striking poses on washing machines, the presumed message of which is that you can be expensively dressed, impossibly thin, and dramatically photogenic, all while a load of towels spins dry. Thirty-something women explain their plans to leave paid employment at some indefinite time in the future: "Home will be a total haven. I'll go through a stack of Martha Stewart books and learn to cook. I'll *feng shui* my furniture and pick just the right sheets from Garnet Hill. Keeping house sounds like fun."

Fun, that is, as opposed to work. Domesticity, we are to believe, is a leisure activity, one that results in elaborate,

spotless perfection while requiring nothing of us but that we purchase a few brand-name products or publications. "Have the best of everything," coos an ad for one domesticity magazine. "Scatter seeds with your own hands. Pick perfect cherries. Take a nap in an orchard. Lift corn from the earth. Curl up with a kitty. Step into your garden. Make a wreath of ginger cookies. Belly flop on snow. Send in the postpaid card . . ." The message is clear: keeping house is not about mastering a set of complex and worthwhile skills for the sake of doing a good job at something that needs to be done. It is about being perfect without even trying. Just subscribe to this magazine, and your house—and your life—will be perfect.

The reality, of course, is that housekeeping is not effortless, and it is never perfect, even when it gets done, which happens less and less. Interest in housekeeping-as-fantasy appears actually to be rising more or less in proportion to decline in the actual doing of housework. Sociologists have found that over the past thirty or forty years, the amount of time that women spend doing housework has fallen by nearly half, with no comparable rise in the amount of time spent on housework by men. Food industry groups report that an ever-increasing percentage of meals are prepared or eaten (or both) away from home. When people do cook at home, they spend less time at it. They spend less time on laundry, too (they've given up ironing), and on cleaning (they've given up washing floors).

And housework of all kinds is increasingly relegated to the fringes of lives filled with other things. In her book *The Time Bind,* the sociologist Arlie Hochschild documents the increasing prevalence of homes in which every adult member of the household works full time for pay outside the home and no one bears explicit, dedicated responsibility—even part

time—for tasks inside the home. The result, she says, is homes so chaotic and unstructured that all the adults in the household would rather be at work than at home. After all, at work people know what their jobs are and can take a break when they're done; at home all anyone knows is that it is a mess waiting for someone to clean it up.

The resentment and anger that this engenders in both men and women is evident in, among other places, a pair of edited volumes with marvelously evocative titles: *The Bitch in the House* and *The Bastard on the Couch*. These books, which purport to give women's and men's perspectives, respectively, on relationships, marriage, sex, and parenthood, turn out to be about housework as much as they are about anything else. Who is doing the housework? Who is not doing it? Who thinks someone else should be doing it, or at least doing more of it, more reliably, more cheerfully, more efficiently? Who is taking responsibility or shirking responsibility? Who feels overburdened and unappreciated? Who feels just plain overwhelmed and exhausted with the demands imposed, most often, by children, who seem constantly to be hungry, dirty, and making a mess?

And it is not just sophisticated, literate professionals with small children who are angry about housework. Parents of grown children who return home after having been away at college discover that in the middle of the night food disappears from the refrigerator and dirty dishes appear in the sink, and the next day no one offers to help with the marketing or the washing up. Retired men whose wives continue (or begin) to work outside the home are startled and dismayed to find that now they are expected to shoulder the majority of the housework, or at least more of it than they have been accustomed to doing. They resent their wives'

expectations, and their wives resent their resistance. Young people, whether married or single, find themselves wishing the whole problem of housework would just go away. "We were both working," said one friend of mine, remembering the years before he and his wife had children, "and we both just wanted someone to take care of us."

This note of longing is the other side of the frazzled reality that is housework for many people. Shouldn't home be a place of refreshment, of nurturance, of beauty? Why do the house, and the housework, seem so out of control? Isn't there a better way? There are books speaking to these concerns, too. Their ostensible subjects range from the secular gospel of decluttering to the spiritual promise of inner healing, but their messages are remarkably similar: if you want to get your life in order, start with your house. Promises that women who declutter their homes will then inevitably lose weight are not uncommon. Renewed family lives, better financial positions, newfound purpose, peace, "blessing," and so forth are similarly portrayed as probable consequences of doing a better job with the housework.

Housekeeping, in other words, may be mundane, but it is not simple. It occupies territory characterized by strong and conflicting currents, from the visions of effortless perfection purveyed by the various divas of domesticity through the harried neglect documented by sociologists and the simmering resentment chronicled by legions of fiction and nonfiction writers to the simultaneously wistful and desperate longing for better things reflected in the housekeeping self-help literature. And then there is the question raised by a friend of mine who has been keeping house more or less faithfully, more or less cheerfully, for her husband and four children for more years than she cares to remember: "What's in it for me?"

THE ORIGINS OF HOUSEWORK

How has housekeeping come to occupy so conflicted a place, in both reality and imagination, in the lives of so many people? Part of the story is to be found in the process of industrialization, which in this country occurred over the course of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries and was accompanied by the separation of work into "public" and "private" spheres and the assignment—more complete in ideology than in fact—of "men's work" to the public sphere and "women's work" to the private sphere.

One effect of industrialization was that it virtually created the kind of work that we now call "housework." Before the mid-nineteenth century, the English word *housework* did not exist. What did exist were the words *housewifery* and *husbandry,* which since the Middle Ages had described the women's work and the men's work, respectively, that was required to run an agrarian household of the kind that became typical of the middle classes—people who were neither aristocrats governing large households employing and sheltering dozens or hundreds of individuals nor people laboring in the homes and on the farms of others, but married couples working their own land and supporting their own (relatively) small households. As the historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan observes, the word *housework* would probably have made no sense to anyone prior to industrialization "since—with the exception of seamen, miners, soldiers, and peddlers—almost all people worked in or on the grounds of a house, their own, or someone else's."

The process of industrialization, in separating work places from home places and identifying the former as a man's place and the latter as a woman's place, so altered the

work of women (and in particular of married women) that a new word was required to describe it: *housework*. Before industrialization, women and men had worked together in and around the home at complementary unpaid tasks that were differentiated by gender: cutting and carrying wood (for men), building and tending fires (for women), making lye (for men), making soap (for women). After industrialization, men (and some women, mostly single) "went to work"—that is, they left their homes in order to labor somewhere else for wages, doing tasks that had been removed from the home to factories or other workplaces. Women (especially wives) "stayed home"—that is, they labored at home without pay, doing housework.

Postindustrial housework was in many instances quite different from the housewifery of the preindustrial era. Running water, refrigeration, gas and electric stoves, washing machines, commercially available soaps and detergents—these and other changes in household technology dramatically changed domestic labor by, among other things, enabling an individual housewife, at least if she worked hard and fast enough, to perform for her household as much or more work as had previously been required of two or three adult women (that is, the preindustrial housewife and her hired help). Industrialization, in other words, did not eliminate or even reduce women's work; what it did was vastly increase the productivity of women working at home.

And there was more work to do than ever. In the preindustrial household, articles of clothing were few and were laundered seldom, if ever. In the industrialized household, factory-made cotton clothing abounded and needed frequent washing (and bleaching and starching and ironing). The one-pot meals that simmered untended on the preindustrial hearth gave way to menus consisting of multiple dishes requiring

active preparation on a stove. The arrival of indoor plumbing created a brand-new domestic chore: cleaning the bathroom, which with the advent of the germ theory of disease was recognized increasingly as absolutely essential for the health of the household. And all this work was to be done by the housewife by herself. Who was left at home to help her? Not her husband, who now went out to work somewhere else and was no longer available to assist with the heavy work in the middle of the day. Not the "hired girl," either, as she could now take a job at the mill and did not have to enter domestic service. The labor of running the industrialized household belonged to the housewife and the housewife alone.

Along with the development of industrialization and the accompanying notion of public and private spheres, however, went the widespread assumption that "real" work takes place in the public sphere and that whatever housewives do at home therefore cannot be work. Men (and single women, like the hired-girl-turned-millworker) worked in the public sphere, where they earned the money required for the purchase of goods and services in the industrialized economy. Married women worked at home, where they did, well, what? Men weren't sure. What did their wives do all day, anyway? Even housewives wondered. Here they were, surrounded by modern tools like stoves and washing machines that were supposed to liberate them from "drudgery"—so why were they perpetually exhausted?

The "problem" of housework thus became not just that it was "women's work" or that it was low-status but that it was widely suspected of not being work at all, even by the men who benefited directly from it and by the women whose lives were consumed by it. The seemingly endless amounts of work actually involved in housework (whose

pace and quantity only increased with the introduction of every new laborsaving device), the absence of any help at home, and the lack of any recognition of the value and necessity—or even the reality—of the housewife's work surely went a long way toward fueling the fires of feminist theorizing about housework. For many feminists, the "housewife" embodied the very antithesis of the self-actualized human being. Germaine Greer, in *The Female Eunuch,* characterized the life of the full-time housewife as one of absolute servitude. Housewives, she said, "represent the most oppressed class of life—contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description."

The feminist movement is nearly half a century old, and a lot of water has gone under the bridge. Many professions previously open only to men are now open to women, and women, including married women with children, are employed outside the home in record numbers. And many households and individuals now no longer operate under the assumption that household work "has to be done," at least not by anyone who is a member of the household. Gone are the days in which, as one former housewife remembers, "take-out or carry-home food was strictly for bachelors, and a frozen dinner, prepared by the hands of strangers, was reserved for times of crisis and regarded by the children as a rare treat and by the adults as a shiftless abdication of responsibility." Nowadays, take-out or carry-home has become the norm in many households and is regarded by many people as a simple necessity. After all, who has time to cook?

In fact, anyone who takes too much time to cook (or clean or iron) runs the risk of being regarded as a parasitic blot on society. One study on attitudes toward gender and the workplace found that "while 'business women' were rated as

similar in competence to 'business men' and 'millionaires,' 'housewives' were rated as similar in competence to the 'elderly,' 'blind,' 'retarded,' and 'disabled.'" Attitudes like these appear not to reflect gender bias pure and simple, for if they did, businesswomen would presumably rank lower than businessmen. They appear, on the contrary, to be a reflection of judgments about housewives as such. I have a friend, a housewife, who says she cringes every time she fills out a form and is asked to state her occupation. Is it any wonder why?

DIVINE DOMESTICITY

What would happen if we were to look at housework and the doers of housework (whether "housewives" or not) not through the postindustrial and postfeminist lenses provided to us by our culture but through the lens of Christian scripture? What we would find is that God does not appear to think as lowly of housework and housekeepers as members of our culture are apt to. On the contrary, scripture abounds with images of God himself as homemaker and housedweller, as one who clothes and is clothed, who feeds people and animals and the earth itself and receives gifts of food and drink in return.

Consider Psalm 104:

> Thou . . . coverest thyself with light as with a garment, who hast stretched out the heavens like a tent, who hast laid the beams of thy chambers on the waters. . . . Thou didst set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be shaken. Thou didst cover it with the deep as with a garment. . . . Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, they give drink to every beast of the field. . . . [All creatures] look to

> thee, to give them their food in due season. When thou givest to them, they gather it up; when thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good things [vv. 1–2, 5–6, 10–11, 27–28].

The psalmist's portrayal is of God as a great housekeeper, pitching a tent, clothing himself with light and the earth with water as with garments, ordering boundaries, making homes for creatures, giving them food, sustaining all life, creating and re-creating through the Spirit.

These themes echo the creation stories of Genesis, in which God sets the first humans in a home he had made for them, a garden both beautiful and nourishing, for in it grew "every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). When our first parents are expelled from the garden, God's parting gesture is to clothe them (Genesis 3:21). And God continues to feed and clothe and shelter his people even in their exile from Paradise: he rains bread from heaven as they wander in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4), he preserves their clothing (Deuteronomy 8:4), and he houses them in booths (Leviticus 23:43).

God's own presence with his people is mediated through dwelling places and domestic activities. In the book of Genesis we read of how the Lord appeared to Abraham as he sat at the door of his tent beside the oaks of Mamre. God's appearing took the form of a visit from three strangers whom Abraham and Sarah welcomed by preparing and serving a meal of bread and meat and curds, and as they welcomed these strangers they welcomed God himself and became recipients of God's promise and blessing (Genesis 18).

When the children of Israel are wandering in the wilderness, God meets with them all in another tent. The "tent of meeting" is staffed by priests whose duties resemble in many

respects the work involved in keeping house: arranging coverings, putting out dishes and food, setting out lamps, arranging utensils and vessels, clearing away ashes (Numbers 4:4–14).

Eventually, the people of Israel settle down, and God settles down too, moving from tent to house, from tabernacle to temple. God does not "dwell" in his house in any grossly physical sense, as King Solomon acknowledges in the prayer with which he dedicates the temple (1 Kings 8:27–28), and yet God is particularly present to his people there. Prayers and petitions are properly brought to God at his house; forgiveness and healing and justice are properly expected from God there. And all these things happen in the context of the ongoing priestly service of God in the temple: the cleansing of vessels, the lighting of lamps, the offering of sacrifices, the preparation and serving of feasts.

When in the fullness of time God does come bodily to dwell with humans in the person of the incarnate Christ, he does so in a way reminiscent of his presence with the Israelites in their wanderings: "The Word became flesh, and pitched his tent among us," testifies John the Evangelist (John 1:14). Jesus describes himself as one who has "no place to lay his head," but he nonetheless shows himself remarkably conversant with the details of housekeeping. He speaks in parables about houses and householders, about sweeping and lamplighting, about vessels that appear clean on the outside but are soiled within. He enters the homes of others to eat with them and concerns himself with others' meals, as, for example, a little girl whom he heals: "Give her something to eat," he tells her parents (Mark 5:43).

At the same time, Jesus is far from exalting domesticity as the highest possible form of anyone's service to God or one's fellow human beings. In the well-known story of Jesus'

visit to the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his teaching while Martha busies herself in the kitchen preparing a meal for Jesus and his entourage (Luke 10:38–42). Finally, Martha goes to Jesus to complain that Mary is not helping her: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

Jesus' response is as notable for what he does not say as for what he does say. He does not shoo Mary into the kitchen. He does not commend Martha for her single-minded focus on domestic matters. Instead, he treats Martha with the same perplexing seriousness with which he treats other disciples and would-be disciples. "Martha, Martha, you are troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

This exchange is more than a little reminiscent of a conversation recorded earlier in the gospel of Luke, in which Jesus invites a man to follow him and the man asks for permission first to bury his father. "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60). It was unthinkable in that culture that a son should neglect the duty to bury his parents, and Jesus' words to this man pose a startling challenge to standard assumptions about what comes first. It was equally unthinkable in that culture that anyone should neglect to feed the hungry stranger at her door. Jesus' words to Martha are equally startling.

It appears that in Jesus' judgment, even so obviously necessary and pious an activity as burying one's parents takes second place to following Jesus. And even something so sacred as hospitality—the moral duty to welcome the stranger—takes second place relative to listening to Jesus' teaching. The first commandment (to love God with all one's

heart and soul and strength and mind) always takes precedence over the second commandment (to love one's neighbor as oneself). But in the paradoxical realm that is real life, it is not possible to love God without loving neighbor, and a primary and essential way of loving one's neighbors is to feed and clothe and house them.

In fact, says Jesus, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked amount to performing the same services for Jesus himself (Matthew 25:40). Jesus is served not as people abandon prosaic duties like these but as people perform such duties. And Jesus portrays a future hope that suggests the activities involved in making a home stand not in contrast to but in continuity with Jesus' own redemptive work. "In my Father's house are many rooms," he assures his disciples (John 14:2). "If someone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

The "homely" character of redemption is, in fact, one of the overarching themes of scripture. God leads the people of Israel into a promised land whose blessings are envisioned as homes to dwell in, clothes to wear, food and drink to satisfy hunger and thirst. The prophetic hope in the midst of homes despoiled is of "a peaceful habitation, secure dwellings, quiet resting places"(Isaiah 32:18). Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God as a banquet at which God is determined every seat should be filled (Luke 14:23). Paul envisions redemption in terms of finally being fully clothed (2 Corinthians 5:4). The book of Revelation offers an eschatological hope that consists in a well-ordered and beautiful city in which God himself dwells with his people (Revelation 21).

The Christian story of redemption, in other words, is a story that moves from home to home. The journey from Eden to the New Jerusalem is one that is characterized by

exile and pilgrimage, to be sure, but also by shelter on the way. Such shelter is necessary for creatures like ourselves, not just for our bodies but for our whole selves. What man or woman or child can remember Eden or long for Jerusalem who has never had any temporal home at all? The practicalities of housekeeping—cooking, cleaning, laundry—are among the things that ground our existence in the particular times and places in which we live and in so doing make it possible for us to keep alive the memory of our first home in paradise and the hope of our ultimate home in God's new creation.

THE LITANY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Precisely because human beings are both physical and spiritual beings, even so profoundly physical a discipline as housekeeping has a spiritual dimension. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that the popular culture of domesticity, far from being a secular realm, is instead suffused with spiritual language that is used to describe both the challenges of housekeeping and their solution. Cable television hosts exhort viewers to "exorcise homes of their sinful mess." Authors of housekeeping manuals suggest that we "clear our clutter with *feng shui,*" that we discover the "joy of Zen" as we sweep our floors, that we feel "God breezes" as we go about our cleaning routines. Our ambivalent and conflicted practices with respect to domestic matters appear to be felt in the collective soul of our culture as a kind of crisis, one that cries out to be addressed in specifically, if not exclusively, spiritual terms.

The problem with many spiritualities of housekeeping is that the remedy they prescribe amounts to more of the disease. Consider the suggestion offered by a magazine devoted

to "simplicity" in domestic matters: "This is the month to buy that luggage or 32-inch TV you've been eyeing—and denying yourself—for years." The reader's problem, as this magazine sees it, is self-denial, and the solution is a 32-inch television set. We are just not good enough consumers, but with a little guidance we can get better, which will come as a great relief to us.

A good deal of the housekeeping literature, in fact, functions as a kind of spiritualized therapy for the anxiety brought on by materialism. "Simplicity" has become the promised land, and "decluttering" the religious practice par excellence. The one thing this gospel does not call into question is the underlying assumption that it is both possible and desirable to be it all, have it all, and do it all. On the contrary: "Our reader is overworked, overcommitted, and overscheduled," says the publisher of the same magazine. "She loves her life and has way too much on her plate, but she doesn't want to give any of it up."

If we are honest, we will recognize this for the deception that it is. If we are feeling the ill effects of being spread half an inch thick and going a million miles an hour, the solution is not to go ever faster and be spread ever thinner. The solution is to take a deep breath, identify what really matters, and do more of that and less of other things.

So what really matters? Well, housework, among other things. It is not the only thing that matters, but it does matter. It matters that people have somewhere to come home to and that there be beds and meals and space and order available there. Whether we do a lot of housework or a little of it, whether we keep house only for ourselves or for other people as well, housework forms part of the basic patterning of our lives, a pattern that we might identify as a kind of "litany of everyday life."

A litany, as Christians have traditionally understood it, is a form of prayer that includes the announcement of various needs or requests, each followed by a response like "Amen" or "Lord, have mercy." Litanies have long been popular among laypeople, who have found in their structure and flexibility a way to pray that speaks to their concerns in tangible and accessible ways. Litanies tend to be both repetitive and comprehensive, and in both of these characteristics there is a certain analogy to housework.

A litany is typically about a lot of different things; it includes requests for God's assistance or care on many different fronts at once. In so doing, a litany draws together the disparate threads of our needs and our concerns and tempers their potentially overwhelming nature. When we have prayed through a litany, we may not have prayed at great length about everything of concern to us, but at least we have covered the bases.

Housework, too, is about a lot of different things. There are errands to be run, meals to be planned, clothes to be laundered, messes to be dealt with. It doesn't take very much disorganization before you feel that you have been trying to juggle a dozen balls and they are all coming crashing down around you. But there is a fundamental unity and focus to housework, too: it is about a certain number of basic needs, and if you are addressing those needs—if, over the course of the day and week and year, the members of your household get dressed and fed and bathed and put to bed—then you can know you have done the things that matter most.

Housework is repetitive, as well. You cannot pick up a room once and be done with it forever. Every time you cook a meal, it disappears shortly thereafter; a few hours later, everyone is hungry again. Clothes laundered today will be in the hamper tomorrow. Anyone who keeps house may on

occasion be tempted to throw up his or her hands and declare with Simone de Beauvoir, "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition."

At such moments we do well to listen instead to the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard: "Repetition is the daily bread that satisfies with benediction." Granted, Simone de Beauvoir probably did more housework in her day than Kierkegaard did in his. But repetition, in itself, is not equivalent to oppressive futility. The sun comes up every morning. Christians gather every Sunday to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Every year brings the cycle of the seasons and of the Christian calendar: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, Pentecost, Ordinary Time.

Housework is akin to these natural and human rhythms of the day, the week, the year. We fix lunch because it is lunchtime. We wash the clothes or the windows because it is Monday or because it is sunny. We pack away coats and boots and get out shorts and sleeveless shirts because winter is over and summer is coming. As we engage with the litany of everyday life, we engage with life itself, with our fellow human beings, with the world in which God has set us all, and thus with God himself.

The particular form this litany takes will look different for different people at different times. There is no one right way to keep house, for so much depends on who is doing the housework, for whom, and under what circumstances. But housekeeping is part of a tradition that takes seriously the basic, homely needs of people for food and clothing and shelter. These are needs that God takes seriously and that Jesus encourages Christians to take seriously. They are not the only important things in the world. But they are important; they have an intrinsic significance and worth that is too often lost

amid the busyness and the technological background noise of the modern world.

My own house and my housekeeping are works in progress, and sometimes it seems that very little progress is actually being made. But I can only imagine the chaos into which my household would long ago have descended if I were less intentional about making time to keep house and if I were less convinced of the inherent value of doing so. We all need the patterns of our lives to echo and emulate the patterns of the larger story that we, as Christians, believe is the true story of the world. Daily involvement in the work of housekeeping, the litany of everyday life, is one way of participating in and living out that story.