

The Sunday Missive – March 17, 2024

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Hymn 474 When I survey the wondrous cross

When I survey the wondrous cross
Where the young Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the cross of Christ, my God:
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DHszgAVFdw>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness* ***In your great compassion blot out my offenses.***

Wash me through and through from my wickedness* ***And cleanse me from my sin.***

For I know my transgressions* ***And my sin is ever before me.***

Against you only have I sinned* ***And done what is evil in your sight.***

And so you are justified when you speak* ***And upright in your judgment.***

For behold, you look for truth deep within me* ***And will make me understand wisdom secretly.***

Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure* ***Wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.***

Make me hear of joy and gladness* ***That the body, once broken may rejoice.***

Hide your face from my sins* ***And blot out all my iniquities.***

Create in me a clean heart, O God* *Renew a right spirit within me.*

Cast me not away from your presence* *And take not your holy Spirit from me.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2h4PXt2FpA>

Hebrews 5:5-10

Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Hymn 439 What wondrous love is this

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To lay aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
To lay aside his crown for my soul.

To God and to the Lamb I will sing, I will sing,
To God and to the Lamb I will sing.
To God and to the Lamb, who is the great I AM ,
While millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing,
While millions join the theme I will sing!

And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on.
And when from death I'm free I'll sing and joyful be,

And through eternity I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
And through eternity I'll sing on.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsVnvN3EVxY>

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

I Am With You -- Lent 5B

Where are we on the learning curve of faith? As we approach the final days of Lent, with all the somber and activities and arresting narratives that go with Holy Week, a good check-in question, benchmark, depth-sounding barometer of our Lenten experience might be this: Where are we on the learning curve of faith? Because no matter how many metaphors we use (and plainly there are plenty available) the point of this exercise is to do what that poppy gospel

song says: "Look at yourself then you can look at others differently. (Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.)" That's what we're supposed to be doing this time of year, looking at ourselves a bit, so we can look at others differently, i.e: with more compassion. Not to achieve some kind of perfection, but to learn better who we are, where we are on the curve, and how we are responding to the opportunities and gifts that God is putting before us.

By next Sunday, we will be caught up in the beautiful and, let's face it distracting dramas of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter. The time for us to be quietly, personally accountable is just about over for this go-round, and we can soon breathe easily if we want to, but today is the Sunday when we have a chance to have our own mini-Passion -- our own private Gethsemane if you will -- a day when there is nothing else going on, narratively speaking, except our own relationship to the deity.

So, what is God offering us today in terms of direction and encouragement along this, our road to happy destiny? Jeremiah, for starters, offers a wondrous revelation of how far God is willing to go to meet us on this road. The Hebrew Bible is full of covenants -- Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob who becomes Israel, Moses -- but none of them is as simply powerful and sublime as this one: Stop thinking. We now know what we need to know to live according to God's plan, for God will forever be written on our hearts. From now on, there will be no lack of assurance of God's presence, no matter what. That's good news. It resembles the way we count -- perhaps too blithely -- on fresh water in this country, or electricity when we want it, or our highways; we can take God's word for granted. Of course, wily Jeremiah echoes the all-knowing God whose underlying corollary is that we will never again have an excuse for forgetting who God is. But God's answer to that is the ultimate benefit of the doubt: There is no more fatal sin. God is offering us complete freedom, and no final responsibility. Sound good?

If not responsibility, then what? Response-ability is what the professors would say. We are not accountable for how the World will turn out; that is God's bailiwick. But we are required to examine and develop and enjoy our relationship with God, by way of our

relationships with others. That is our business. The psalmist gives us a beautiful analogy of how this relationship must affect us. Just look at the words we just read together in Psalm 51 that describe what we must do to align ourselves God's word: Ask for our offenses to be forgiven, blotted out; ask God to cleanse, wash, restore, renew and rescue us and make our hearts humble. That is our requirement: pursue a grateful and humble approach to life, the recompense for which is a future free – completely free – of ultimate responsibility for all our failures to be perfect. God was trying to offer us this way back in the time of Jeremiah. God offered us this some more in God's divine humanity in Christ. God is offering us this same bargain – and I mean it's a bargain – today. We'll have a big celebration two Sundays from now on the Feats of the Resurrection, but, as the feller says on TV, "So you don't forget, call before midnight today..."

What was Jesus doing on the cross? Why did he die? We use the word sacrifice, but we tend to use it quite differently than the people who first wrote down these stories. When we talk about sacrifice, we emphasize the death of something, the forfeiture of life: destruction as the price of an escape from disaster or the price of some attainment; like a hostage situation: Give us your friend Jesus and we won't condemn you all. What kind of god would make such a demand? The ancients understood that we all die. Everything alive dies. Jesus was human, that is the reason Jesus died, period.

On the contrary, when the ancients – for whom death was a much more commonplace occurrence – when they performed a sacrifice, it was a way of releasing life, so that many might benefit. When Jesus says "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit," this is what he is talking about – not a deadly means to a good end, but a generous means of nurturing life. The healthy seed and its nutrition for our lives.

The question of why Jesus dies is moot. He dies because he is human – that's part of the deal. What we're talking about is how Jesus dies. How does his death reflect his relationship with the deity? Where is Jesus on the faith learning curve? What are the clues about how we should die? About how we should live? These are the questions that we can spend this last Sunday of Lent examining if we will: What do

we know that's worth dying for? As always, we hold in our hearts the loved ones and friends and neighbors who have gone off to war or stayed home in service and died for their duty. Even as we love and honor their memory, none of us wants, or wants our children to join them.

No, for most of us, the job is to demonstrate that for which we would die by refining that for which we live. We prove what we would die for by how we live. Our relationship to God, the measure of our faith, our place on the faith curve, if you will, is determined by the choices we make along the road. We have been given, written on our hearts, the causes, the means, the methods of living for those things for which we would die if we had to. Our hope lies not in never having to beg the question, (because we might be willing to do that if we had to.) Our hope lies in the promise of God to stay with us, no matter how well we succeed.

A dear friend once had a dog named Ozzie. One day she brought home a toy for Ozzie, a stuffed camel of some kind. Ozzie took to that camel immediately. When the time came for dinner, Ozzie came downstairs and began eating in the kitchen corner, but suddenly stopped. He left the room. He went upstairs. A few minutes later, Ozzie came back with Mr. Camel in his mouth, put him down by the dog bowl, and finished his dinner. Ozzie just wanted his new friend with him all the time. That dog knew what we all too frequently forget: God will stay with us and fulfil us when our choices are sketchy, our performances iffy. All we really have to do for sure is keep the image of our never-failing, ever new companion close at hand. Know this: I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.

Hymn 473 Lift high the cross

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
till all the world adore his sacred Name.

Led on their way by this triumphant sign,
the hosts of God in conquering ranks combine.

Each newborn servant of the Crucified
bears on the brow the seal of him who died.

O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,
as thou hast promised, draw the world to thee.

So shall our song of triumph ever be:
praise to the Crucified for victory.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lovEkx76VvQ>

Limitations

The subtlest strain a great musician weaves,
Cannot attain in rhythmic harmony
To music in his soul. May it not be
Celestial lyres send hints to him? He grieves
That half the sweetness of the song, he leaves
Unheard in the transition. Thus do we
Yearn to translate the wondrous majesty
Of some rare mood, when the rapt soul receives
A vision exquisite. Yet who can match
The sunset's iridescent hues? Who sing
The skylark's ecstasy so seraph-fine?
We struggle vainly, still we fain would catch
Such rifts amid life's shadows, for they bring
Glimpses ineffable of things divine.

Henrietta Cordelia Ray