

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Dr. James C. Pace

Year B: 1 Kings 19:9–18; Psalm 27:5–11; 2 Peter 1:16–21; Mark 9:1–9**

As I have told you many times, I grew up in the Episcopal Church. I grew up around, through, and within its liturgies of life, death, and everything in between, and they have changed my life. I can remember even as a small boy, that I loved the season of Lent. I loved the purple vestments and altar frontals. They were elegant, royal. My mother was the altar guild directress at St. Mary's Church in Palmetto, Florida. My dad was the treasurer, lay reader, and a chalice bearer. And a few days before Lent began, dad would bring out this really tall step ladder and carefully traipse it into the sanctuary, and together, we would drape the huge crucifix above the altar with a really thin purple veil. It was a sheer veil that covered the corpus of Christ. When it hung there, it cast an eeriness over us all. At least it did to me. The body of Christ on the cross looked *shrouded*. I loved the season of purple. And though I lapse into such recollections all too frequently now, it is good to remember how the church and its liturgies shape our lives.

One of my seminary professors at Sewanee, Dr. Marion Hatchett, a kind man gifted in liturgical studies, called liturgy *the ways we bring our Sacred Myth to life*. Myth, not meaning something that is untrue, or a fairy tale, but rather, the truths of eternal life that are expressed in and through time. In and through liturgy we come to know these truths in our holidays, holy days, the seasons, the colors and changes, the challenges and chances of this mortal life. We live into the pulse of life, we mark the boundaries of our lives, and we are given the courage to break through those boundaries to truly, authentically, live. That is truly the Good News and the power of living into a life of faith that is forever promising and never dead.

Today, the Second Sunday in Lent, we are told in the Gospel to take up our cross and to lose our lives; in so doing, we will inherit the life eternal. Probably for most of us, taking up our cross on a day-to-day basis most often means placing a piece of jewelry around our neck. We either slide the chain that bears a cross around our neck or over our head. All too often when we do these things, we then usually simply go on living life as usual. The cross around our neck becomes fashion apparel. We might even hear someone say:

“Your cross is so pretty. Is it Tiffany?” And the response: “Oh no, no! Even better, it’s Michael Kors!”

When Mark wrote his Gospel somewhere around the year 64 in the Common Era, it was a time of great persecution. Large numbers of Christians were martyred by crucifixion. The church in Rome was shattered by these events. Mark’s words served to challenge Christians to be ready to face death, if need be, to proclaim their loyalty to Christ . . . and to their fellow human beings. They were willing to forfeit life on earth in the assurance of gaining life eternal. In Mark’s day, taking up one’s cross could very well mean that you found yourself nailed to one.

In the history of the church during times of persecution, and sadly in those areas where this remains true even to this day, men and women face the choice of taking up the cross in self-sacrifice for Christ and the Gospel and for loving other human beings, even as we should love self. It was clear to every martyr what Jesus meant when he said: “What does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?” For them, the world meant home, family, one’s work, and safety . . . a peaceful life. All this, they were ready to sacrifice rather than be

false to their commitment to Christ and the directive to love and serve other human beings.

But what meaning has this for us? After all, just days ago, many of us paraded through Times Square with a cross of ashes imposed upon our foreheads. That cross did not get us arrested, no charges were filed against us. Somehow, without suffering, we are dulled to the awesome power of the cross.

Even so, God calls each of us to an abundant life. An abundant life is one marked by a precious balance. Taking up our cross is one way to jump over into the calling to be authentic, balanced, creative, and alive as Spirit people. Taking up one's cross is a way of life that turns toward what truly matters and away from what distorts, maims, cheats, ruins, and destroys. We have some choice in the matter as to the way to proceed. Some of these choices are controversial.

For example, as an educator, I was presented with such a choice this past week by powers at the highest level of our nation who will remain nameless. I am a teacher, an educator at NYU. As an educator, and horribly so, just days ago, we were again reminded of the mortal danger that confronts our students, even in

the safety of the classroom. And as an educator, I was presented with a choice to help avert these tragedies in the future. The choice advocated for me as an educator, is whether or not I will go out and buy a gun to reestablish the safety of our schools. I don't own a gun right now and have never wanted to. It's a personal choice; I know clergy who own guns. But to help stop these shootings, again, as suggested by many with bases in power, I can and should, go out and purchase one. It would be easy for me to do this. As a matter of fact, nothing would stop me. And since I could, I might as well just go ahead and purchase an assault weapon. There is nothing that would stop me. I could then take the weapon to my office, where somehow, I guess, it would be a deterrent to future crimes against our children. I suppose that if someone started acting peculiarly, at least in my environs, I suppose that I could run and get it. If I had the time, that is. But what would I do with it? I have no training in how to use it. Most people who own them, after all, do not. I know all too tragically that such weapons of mass destruction fire a lot of bullets in a very short period of time. And those rapid fire moments cause multiple and tragic ends . . . each beyond repair, so many lives shattered.

We can make choices which way we go in our lives. In regard to human ways, we can make choices that distort, and putrefy, or we can move in cross-filled ways that attempt to balance, nurture, enliven, and empower, with the potential to give life rich meaning and value where people are treated as people, each equal to the other, and to be respected and protected as such. These are the promises we make in the liturgy of baptism. Lent is the Petri dish for the realization of these promises . . . for their nurture and study and how to maximize their growth potentials. Sometimes our freedoms do indeed need needed controls.

Otherwise, there is chaos. When evidence informs our practice; when a course to follow is dictated by our Sacred Myth, often times liturgically, we can then pick up a cross in an attempt to have it pull us forward with the moral courage it takes to value and respect our fellow human beings.

This season of purple allows us every chance to see through the purple veil. There, the living body of Jesus takes in a breath and screams out, pulling itself off the nails that kept it down. When we jerk out the nails of our own fears, we practice those certain sacrifices that are sometimes needed for the authenticity of every human being. This courage demands risk and it takes

all of our love. It gives us the opportunity to see how much we live life for self and how little for everyone else who deserves every chance to live to a ripe old age. It gives us a chance to see if the flowing baptismal waters of our lives are freely flowing or if they are bottled up in some Mason jar of our own making.

Soon. Very soon. We will enter the sacred space of the Eucharistic Prayer. I believe that Professor Marion Hatchett, an educator, God rest his wonderful soul, and who never owned a gun, would say that the Eucharistic Prayer is the epicenter of where we need to start. The church's tried and true liturgy will once again unite us together in the power and the presence and the mystery of Christ, who is always with us. The Christ who paid the ultimate sacrifice for us on a cross so that we might have life and live that life more abundantly and do everything in our power to let other people have the same privilege. Here, we are given the courage and the wherewithal, to say "NO" when we have to, and to say "YES" when we must. On our knees, doubt meets certainty. On our knees, in our sadnesses and during the incredulities of life, we can rise up on feet and legs that take our hearts, minds, and souls back out into the world. On our knees, let us take up a cross and let it drive us forward,

within, through, and beyond this very Lent for the good of us all . . . for our very lives.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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