

September 13, 2009; Proper 19b
Prov 1:20-33; Ps 19
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

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If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross
and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who
lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34-5)

A number of years ago, in my last Diocese, I attended a diocesan gathering of Christians who came together to renew their faith. We sang and we prayed; we learned and we wept; it was a good weekend. At the very end, one of the laypersons asked our retired bishop about a thorny church controversy, one which was dividing the people of our diocese, the very people who had learned a new love and respect for one another that weekend. The reading at the closing Eucharist had been the one we heard today, and the aged bishop drew on it as he raised himself to his feet and walked slowly to the podium. He looked over the crowd and spoke two sentences: "When Christ calls us, he calls us to die. It seems to me that some people are refusing to die."

I have rarely heard the Gospel preached so effectively. Those words invited each one of us to examine our own lives against the sacrificial call of Christ, and to acknowledge that we, too, are among those who are refusing to die. We do not give up what we could for the well-being of others. We do not always take care to make sure that the companies we patronize treat their workers well. We cling to our own positions, eager to see the truth prevail, but we sometimes drift and become eager to make our opponents out to be wrong, even though they are made in the image of Christ. We do not ask God often enough to take away our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh. We do not ask God often enough for the grace to die to self, even though we know that such death is the path to true life.

We do not ask God often enough to take away our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh, but today we are asking. Today Evelyn, Chelsea, and Madeline have come here to be baptized, and what they are asking is to die: to die to the people they would have been, and to be raised in the mercy of Christ. To put off the ways of self, and to be clothed in the love of Christ. To put off the mask of indifference, and to live in the way of *agape*. To die to the cheap pleasure of judgment, and to be raised to the grace of forgiveness. To die to the ways of pleasure, and to be raised in the paths of joy. And we, as we stand and reaffirm our baptismal covenant, are asking nothing different: that we may be given grace to lose our life for Christ, for only so will we save it.

A few days after 9/11, a priest at the parish I was serving as an intern stood up in the pulpit and said, "This is what we've been practicing for each Sunday."¹ She did not mean that Christianity is about getting right with God while we can; that's only part of it. What she meant is that Eucharist, our weekly gathering in celebration, is an act of resistance to hardship, terror, and loss, a practice that trains us in dying and in rising, in sacrifice and in joy. We take bread and we offer it to God, we bless it and we break it: "This is my body, broken for you" (I Cor 11:24) -- and yet, week after week, it endures. It stands in for all the struggling, imperfect, people of Christ, broken sometimes, by our own failures and sometimes by the cruelty or indifference of others, who nevertheless get out of bed in the morning and take up their cross and find in the doing that they have strength to go on.

And not only strength, but *joy*! Love, joy, gladness, peace fulfillment -- for the strange kind of dying we are called to do is the dying which sets us free to be real, to be whole, to be holy. We begin by being mixed in our nature, our gold and our clay all tumbled together like a stream that runs both salt and fresh (James 3:11), but slowly, slowly, the dross goes away. Like the Velveteen

¹ Nancy Cox, September, 2001, preached at Trinity Church, Southport, Connecticut.

Rabbit, which could not be Real until it had been so carried around and tossed about that all its fur had worn smooth and its whiskers had come off, we learn to move and dance and become Real ourselves in the very act of letting go of ourselves enough to love and to be loved in return.

There are many ways to learn to love, many languages in which we show one another affection. In our culture, perhaps, we tend to emphasize the giving and receiving of stuff. Engagements “require” rings; birthdays, gifts. But there are other languages of love, which are, perhaps, worth more, for they feed the hunger of the heart: Attentiveness. Laughter. Patience. Kindness. Time. Time is a big one. These are languages that do not desert us in hard times, when maybe we cannot give the gift we want to give, but only the one we have.

Learning to give the gift we have is the hard part of Christianity; it is the daily carrying of our cross, of learning to be honest about who we are. It is the thing that lets our faith be simple, not simplistic. Simplistic religion hears Jesus say, “ask and ye shall receive,” and it thinks of cars and big homes and huge success. Simplicity hears the same words and learns to hope for our daily bread, and then for bread for the day after that. The one requires magic, the other faith. It’s not that there are no big dreams; there are no dreams larger or more life-giving than those of God. It’s just that God chooses to accomplish them by simple means. Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.” Dorothy Day did not set out to feed eight hundred men twice a day for the length of the Great Depression and half a century beyond it²; she just offered sweaters to people who were cold, and when she ran out, she at least offered them coffee, and some bread to go with it, and a little apple butter. Simple things, but only God knows how many lives she and her co-workers saved, or how many souls they rescued from despair.

The tools of our salvation are everyday things: bread. water. wine. mercy. It is our hearts, not the things themselves, which lend them power -- the Holy Spirit of God infusing us and all creation, lifting us day-by-day to the One who called us into being. But, if grace is abundant, it is not inevitable: we have the capacity to say no. In today’s reading from Proverbs, Wisdom goes out into the streets like a street-corner evangelist, calling to the passers-by: “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” (Wisdom 1:22) “Simple,” here, refers to ignorance, not to people who have managed to attain simplicity. Wisdom implores us to seek knowledge, to learn the ways of God, to train our minds and our hands in the work of God, and not, simply, to pass her by. She promises: “My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; if you cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures -- then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God....Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path.” (Prov 2:1-5, 9) If we listen to the Word of God, if we ponder, if we cry out with everything that is in us for understanding, if we break the stony casing around our heart and see -- really *see* -- what is around us enough to begin to ask real questions, then -- then! -- are we holy ground, prepared and ready for the Spirit of God to grow rich and deep and green in us until we become agents of grace. Take away our hearts of stone, and give us hearts of flesh.

Some of you may have noticed that, in the time I have been here, we have re-named Christian education “Christian formation.” So much of our secular education these days is aimed at

² Eight hundred men a day is the number of men at the Mott St. House of Hospitality where Day lived and from which she created the Catholic Worker movement. Obviously, the number would multiply sharply if we were to take into account those helped at all the other Catholic Worker houses. Those of you who were here last week and this will, by now, have figured out that I’ve been reading Day’s work. The book is called *Selected Writings*, edited by Robert Ellsberg. I recommend it most highly.

learning facts, gathering information, finding fruitful ways to store and process and manage and display it -- this may give us knowledge, but it does not confer wisdom. Wisdom requires the involvement of the heart. Knowledge confers mastery, but wisdom reveals connection. Knowledge can teach you every known fact about the movements of ocean currents and how they shape our environment, but wisdom impels us to act on that knowledge to preserve the wholeness of the earth.

In the old conception, learning was linked to love, and it changed your life. We love what we do not understand in order that we might become it. This learning is the stone that turns lead to gold; it forms us in the image of God. At the start of our road, when we stood where Madeline and Chelsea and Evelyn stand today, we did not understand God; most of us were babies! But we -- or those around us -- felt some kind of pull drawing us toward God, and so we came and we listened and we tried and we failed and we listened and we tried again. And, gradually, the old self falls away, and the paths of holiness become our new nature.

The Hindus tell of a time when human beings were all gods, but they abused their divine nature, so that Brahma, the chief of their gods, decided to take it away and hide it forever. He called the lesser gods into council to consider where they should hide it. "The council said, 'We will bury humanity's divinity deep in the earth,' but Brahma said, 'No that will not do; one day they will dig down deep into the earth and will find it.' Then they said, 'We will sink their divinity into the deepest ocean.' Again Brahma replied, 'No, not there, for they will learn to dive into the deepest waters, and search the ocean bed and find it.' Then the lesser gods said, 'We will take it to the top of the highest mountain and hide it there.' But again Brahma replied, 'No, for eventually humans will climb every high mountain on earth; they will be sure some day to find it and take it up again.' Then the lesser gods gave up and concluded, 'We do not know where to hide it, for it seems there is no place on the earth or in the sea that humans will not eventually reach.' Then Brahma said, 'Here is what we will do with humanity's divinity. We will hide it deep down in humans themselves; they will never think to look for it there.'"³

Learning to give the gift we have is the reason we Christians are called to live in community. Martin Buber wrote, "I was a Thou before I was an I." He meant that self is a gift we give to one another. A baby first learns that she is a cause of joy when other people lift her up and gaze on her and smile. We worship in community, we share our lives, so that we can be that loving gaze for one another. But, even more, so that we will be reminded, week by week, day by day, that it is God's love for us in Christ Jesus which placed that beauty there, and which smiles upon us, day by day, until we learn to smile back. Layer by layer, we peel the stone from one another's hearts, and uncover the flesh God created. And the gift we find is not our own capacities, large or small as they may be, but the enduring presence of God within us, working through us for the restoration of the world.

Today and every day we come before God and ask, "Take away our hearts of stone, and give us hearts of flesh." And what are we asking but that we may find the God who has already found us, that we may see the Image of God which is already planted in our souls, that we may learn to know the mercy by which we draw each breath and wiggle our toes and walk in the light of the sun? What are we asking but to become what we already are, that person we sense we might be, except that we cannot figure out how to get there?

We come before God and we pray; we ask for grace and we receive it. Like water touching drought-parched earth, it heals division, smoothes scars, brings dormant seeds to life. And by the grace of God, those new green shoots *become* our Cross, the very Life in us destroying all those other things in us which would keep us from God forever. The love we learn to give makes our unloving

³ Legend told by Mike Marsh, *Interrupting the Silence* (a blog). This is their parallel to our stories of Eden and of Babel, but also contains similar elements to our theology of baptism, which, we believe, plants the Holy Spirit in our hearts to guide us into all truth.

impulses intolerable. The thankfulness we know destroys our ingratitude. The mercy we have received becomes sheer pain when we seek to withhold mercy from others. These are the workings of Christ in our souls. So let us pray, this day and always: "Take away our hearts of stone, and give us hearts of flesh." Amen.