

Death Before Life

These past weeks have us smack dab in the middle of the most famous sermon ever given by Jesus.

It's called the sermon on the mount, and Matthew is the one who recounts it for us.

It's the sermon that pulls all of the strings of the gospels together.

In other words, we can't do what Jesus calls us to do today until we've grasped and begun to practice the other things he teaches us throughout the gospels.

For example, we can only live the way of the sermon on the mount if we Metanoia.

If we enter into the larger mind of God.

We can only live the way of the sermon on the mount if we're born again, as Jesus says to Nicodemus during that midnight meeting in that dark corner of Jerusalem.

We can live the way of the sermon on the mount only if we're transformed — from the inside out.

Only then can we begin to live in our day-to-day lives this strange, sometimes confusing, yet unimaginably beautiful way of living with one another, and with ourselves.

It's a life of authenticity.

It's a life of integrity.

It's a life of being real.

The sermon on the mount pulls together the entire gospel!

For example, the sermon on the mount sheds light on why Jesus says things like "there will be no signs for this generation."

Why not?

Why not toss out a miracle or two?

Why not do something extravagant to make your point?

Why not indeed?

Because signs and wonders cannot accomplish the interior change that each of us needs to make if we are to enter into the kingdom of God.

Spectacle and magic are little more than circus shows.

Amusing distractions.

But spectacle and magic don't change hearts, and they don't change minds.

The sermon on the mount helps us understand why Jesus says so often, "many of you will cry out 'Lord Lord!, we spoke your name and spread your word,' and I will reply, I don't know you!"

Why is that?

Because, as we see with so much of what passes for Christianity today, our human inclination is to turn our faith into something palatable.

Something that fits in neatly with our consumer society, or our nationalistic pride, or our devotion to military might and our retirement funds.

And so we twist and turn the truths of our faith, turning Jesus into Rambo, draping the American flag over the cross of Christ.

We ignore the deep wisdom of Jesus.

Replacing it with our own shortsighted foolishness.

So how do we enter into this life of transformation?

How do we find within ourselves that pathway to the new world that Jesus invites us into?

Well, to put it bluntly, we have to die.

I read recently about Archbishop Tutu, reflecting on his friendship with Nelson Mandela over the many decades of their struggle against white apartheid.

One of the things the Archbishop saw in his friend Mandela was that as a young man, Nelson was an angry militant.

As a co-founder of the African National Congress, Mandela was convinced that armed resistance and armed rebellion was the only path to defeat apartheid.

And then something happened to Mr. Mandela.

He died.

Not literally, of course.

But as he was imprisoned for over 20 years, mostly in solitary confinement, as the government stripped him of every chance to control any aspect of his life, in a very real sense, he truly did die.

And the result of that death is that Mandela emerged from his prison cell, he emerged from his tomb, as a new person.

Now seeking, and offering, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Which, in fact, led to not only the overthrow of apartheid, but it's peaceful overthrow.

How did Mandela get there?

He died.

When I look at the miracle that St Elizabeth's has become over these last 20 or so years, I am convinced that we are here only because this parish also died.

Those many years ago, when so many left out of despair and dejection, as attendance dropped to a small remnant, as the grounds were locked up tighter than Fort Knox in between Sunday services, we are here today because of that death experience.

So many churches get so wrapped up with the notion of being a club, with membership perks, and preselected seats, preselected, officers, and preselected virtues.

Such places don't attract new people.

Such places are where the gospel falls on deaf ears.

Because that's what we get with **untransformed** human nature.

In that untransformed place, we gather and organize and try to make sense of our life together.

We create rules and hierarchies and caste systems so that we know where we fit in.

But then, thanks be to God, comes that wild and crazy Spirit of Jesus, who says: "I'm breaking it all down!"

Because the only place you really belong is in the heart of my father.

The only rules and regulations that are really worth following are those that encourage you to love one another.

To give yourselves to one another.

To put one another first."

I believe St Elizabeth's near death experience those many years ago plowed the field for these new seeds of the kingdom to be planted.

Those seeds have grown over these decades into amazing trees, into fragrant flowers.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of this magnificent adventure.

It's the adventure that has its roots all the way back in Genesis, and the creation of the first day.

"And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.

God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.'

And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day." Gen. 1:3-5.

First night, then light.

First death, then life.

It's the adventure that puts us elbow to elbow with the folks bellying up to the bar to listen this morning to the prophet Sirach.

"If you choose, you can keep the commandments, because acting faithfully is a choice.

He's placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for the one you want.

Set before each person are life and death.

The one you choose is the one you'll get." Sir. 15:15-17.

How shall we choose?

Perhaps by admitting that we reject the transformed life when we give ourselves “to things that don’t matter.

When we exchange our longing for the divine for a trip to the mall.

When we rush to meet meaningless deadlines or bow before demands that are unworthy.” B. Younger, paraphrased.

It’s the struggle Paul is having this morning with the church in Corinth.

The folks there are like so many of our churches today.

All wrapped up with status and envy and me-first.

It’s a problem as old as humanity, but Jesus calls us to a new way.

How then shall we embrace life?

Ironically, by dying to our own best thinking.

Then, “by committing ourselves to loving God with all of our heart and mind and soul.

By giving to the poor whenever we are asked, and working for justice whenever we can.

By caring for the hurting and the weird, for the vulnerable and rejected.

By playing with children, and taking time to listen closely to our elders.

By laughing!

Loudly, and often.

And by crying too.

By being patient with our imperfections, and the imperfections of our neighbor.

By taking a walk around the block, without a phone or earbuds on.

By reading a poem, or writing one.

Maybe what Jesus is saying to us today is simply this:

'Stop doing what's not worth your time.

Look around — take a deep breath!

Apologize!

Forgive!" Id.

Work peacefully for radical change in this broken world, but do it with the joyful realization that all shall be well!

Be willing to die, and you shall truly live!

+amen