

## Die Before You Die

How often do we stop to think about the central role of death in our faith?

My guess: not often!

It's morbid, creepy and depressing!

And yet, if we can bring ourselves, even for a few moments, to stop awhile, to sit with death, something quite amazing begins to unfold.

It's that invitation to sit with death that this Sunday of the Palms, this Sunday of the Passion, is all about.

It shouldn't come as a surprise.

After all, every step of our journey with Jesus, which begins with the first Sunday in Advent, practically screams about the centrality of death in our life of faith.

Things like: the death of our expectations about the who and what of the Messiah: a warrior king or a suffering servant?

Like the death Jesus sees in the faces of the least, the lost and the left behind; the blind, the poor, the excluded.

Like the death of Jairus's daughter, and Lazarus — whom Jesus actually waits to die before making the trek to Bethany!

Where his raising Lazarus from the dead is immediately met with his own death sentence, pronounced by the religious big shots.

Even though I spent 3 years in a rigorous seminary learning about theology, I never learned much until I spent nearly 5 years working with folks recovering from addiction.

If you want to see death on a daily basis, go there.

Because every day, in order to live, folks with addictions must find a way to die to just about everything they thought they knew.

About life.

About themselves.

And about God.

Those who can't muster the whatever it takes to die, soon find themselves back at the other end of a bottle or a needle.

Those who are able to muster it, find amazing new lives!

But only AFTER they die.

There is a riddle that perhaps ought be posted over every church door.

That perhaps might hang on the wall of every family calling itself Christian.

The riddle is this:

"Die before you die, so that when you die, you won't die."

The poet echos this riddle when he writes:

And so long as you haven't experienced this:  
to die  
and so to grow,  
You are only a troubled guest  
On the dark earth.  
-Goethe

Another poet observes:

What you call 'salvation' belongs to the time  
before death.  
If you don't break your ropes  
while you're alive,  
Do you think  
Ghosts  
will do it after?  
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What is found now  
is found then  
If you find nothing now,  
you will simply end up  
with an apartment  
In the City of Death.  
If you make love with the divine now,  
In the next life  
you will have  
the face  
Of  
satisfied desire.  
-Kabir

Die before you die so that when you die, you will not die.

Isn't this refusal to die the engine for much of the racism and misogyny that we as a nation are only now beginning to grapple with?

That refusal to die to the grandiose myths that we are wonderful and ingenious and self-made marvels?

That refusal to take that hard and necessary look at the fact that much of this nation's wealth is built on the backs of men, women and children, kidnapped from their native land?

Brutalized and beaten and forced into labor they did not choose to do?

And even when slavery as a legal institution ended, for how many decades have we refused to acknowledge the institutionalization of slavery?

Through mass incarceration?

Redlining?

Jim Crow laws?

And terrorism inflicted on those people of color who dare make something of their lives?

Just today, many states seek to curtail voting rights as a way to limit participation in our democracy by people of color.

The racism directed at our Asian sisters and brothers also arises out of a refusal to die to the myth that we are a great melting pot.

The question, as my dear friend Pua Hopkins used to ask, is:

“Who’s doing the melting?”

At long last we are peeling back the layers of denial and myth and willful blindness to the many atrocities inflicted upon non-white people in our nation.

We are coming to recognize that folks like me, who say, “I never owned slaves, my ancestors arrived dirt poor from Poland, laboring in coal mines,” that we too benefit from a system designed to help people like me, and hinder those not like me.

The theologian John Shea explains that there are two basic parts to our human nature.

The first is what we use to survive in what is far too often a “dog eat dog” world.

We learn to scheme.

To connive.

That scheming and conniving is the lifeblood of racism and misogyny.

And if we stay there our whole lives, we remain simply — connivers.

But there is also in every single person the ability, the capacity, to receive great and profound gifts.

Gifts of insight, understanding, and compassion.

If only we can be “silently present.” Id. at 105.

Since it is only in silence — that we can truly hear.

Isn't that what today's gospel tells us?

Jesus.

Arrested.

Tortured.

Mocked and condemned.

He offers no defense.

He makes no plea for mercy.

Instead, he enters into the deep silence.

As all of the smaller deaths he has accepted throughout his life culminate in the greatest of all deaths he will ever endure.

The death that comes when it seems that even God forsakes him.

"Eli Eli lama sabachtani!"

The essence of our faith is not winning the rat race, nor is it in white supremacy.

The essence of our faith is not in "America First" or insisting that all non-Christians go to hell.

The essence of our faith is to die.

Before we die.

So that when we die — we will not die.

Which leaves precious little room for claims of superiority or bigotry or hate.

It eliminates all judgment of others.

It sets before each one of us a task that only an ever deepening faith can achieve.

It is a task rooted in letting go.

In surrender.

As we seek to become the grain of wheat that must die in order to produce fruit.

As we seek to become the cocoon that must split apart in order for the butterfly to emerge.

As we seek to become the melting wax of a candle so that light and heat can be seen and felt. Id.

Death transforms.

Clinging to the false gods of nationalism and racism does not.

All of which brings us to Holy Week.

Perhaps too many of us move from Palm Sunday to Easter, missing the deep and profound mysteries of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Perhaps especially this year, as we slowly emerge from a year of pandemic, I invite you to take part this Thursday and this Friday as we dive deeply into the death that Jesus freely embraces.

Only by coming to grips with his death — can we truly appreciate the miraculous and wonderful events of Easter morning.

Only then can we begin to see the miraculous and wonderful events that can be in store for us too!

If only we can summon the courage — to die.

So come, this Thursday, at 6 PM, as we hear the story of Jesus removing his coat and shirt.

As he bends down.

And washes the feet of his friends.

As he challenges Peter!

Who at first glance objects!

And who then submits.

Because in spite of it all, he's determined to be a follower of Jesus.

Come this Friday!

As the stations of the cross are followed.

As Jesus meets his death.

As everything becomes perfectly still.



This — is Holy Week!

It takes us from unimagined heights to unspeakable depths.

It prepares us to die before we die so that when we die we won't have to die.

May your Holy Week be filled!

With mystery.

And insight.

With hope.

And with joy!

+amen

