

**5 Lent
March 18, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, next week is Palm Sunday, and then the week after is Easter. Our gospel reading this morning is once again from John. However, by John's reckoning this story about Jesus predicting his death happens AFTER Jesus has already entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. So, the chronology is just a little bit off.

This reading from John also includes the saying, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." In the Synoptic Gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke this saying ... or its equivalent ... appears in the middle of Jesus' travels, at Caesarea Philippi, a week before the Transfiguration. The author of John's gospel seems to have borrowed the saying and placed it here ... after Jesus has entered Jerusalem ... for literary effect.

If that isn't confusing enough this reading this morning begins a narrative about some "Greeks" ... which means that they were Gentile pilgrims, not Jews ... who were looking for Jesus. They approached Philip with a request, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." Philip relayed their request to Andrew, and together they told Jesus. But then it is as if the author of John's gospel lost his train of thought ... the Gentile pilgrims are forgotten and the story takes a new turn. We never learn if the Gentile pilgrims got an audience with the one about whom they had heard so many claims. Jesus seems to have ignored them and their questions.

There is a lot in this story, along with the reading from Jeremiah and the Letter to the Hebrews. But, I keep wondering about those Gentile pilgrims who wanted to see Jesus ... and then seem to have been ignored. I wonder what it would have been like to have traveled at least some distance to see someone like Jesus, most likely with some curious questions, and then have him overlook you ... as if you didn't exist. Why would John include this part of the story then not finish it?

As we approach the end of our Lenten season, and we hear references to Jesus' death, it seems appropriate to talk about the role of death in our own lives. I'm not just talking about the kind of death that comes when the blood stops flowing through our bodies, but rather the kind of death ... existential death ... that robs of us of life because of fear. This kind of death ... and our fear of it ... has an immense power in our lives.

When people are ignored, discounted, marginalized, disregarded, snubbed, banished, or ostracized it can feel as if they are not alive ... at least to the person or institution on the other end of the transaction. This is existential death. I imagine most of you know situations in your

own life where someone just looked over you as if you weren't there, and it feels as if they are not even acknowledging that you are alive, much less have worth. And when the other person is someone close to you it hurts all the more. That is the power of existential death, and I believe it robs us of living life to its fullest.

The Jesus of John's gospel for this week is a deeply disturbed man. "Now my soul is troubled," he says. But he never asks God to save him from his troubles. He says that his troubles are the very reason he came.

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The person who loves his life will lose it, while the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

This saying of Jesus was so central to his mission and message that all four gospels include it ... and twice in Luke.

"The person who loves his or her life will lose it, and the one who hates his or her life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

The Letter to the Hebrews paints a similar picture of Jesus. Hebrews says that "in the days of his flesh", meaning while he was alive in this world, he prayed his prayers to God *"with loud cries and tears."* This Jesus was *"despised and rejected,"* a man of sorrows who knew from experience the meaning of grief. But despite being rejected by the Temple authorities, the letter to the Hebrews this morning also tells us that in God's eyes Jesus was worthy ... God made him a *"priest of the order of Melchizedek."*

What happens when we fear that we will be *"despised and rejected?"* I believe that it is that fear that steals away life from us. What if we are not included? What if we are not acknowledged for what we have done, or for the title we have earned, for the position we hold? What happens when we have a truth to tell, but no one will listen ... at least no one who can do something about it. What happens when we are not recognized as being someone ... as if we never existed. What if we were like those Gentile pilgrims ... those "Greeks" ... who traveled to see Jesus, but then were ignored?

We all experience existential death. It happens to babies when they cry and their mother doesn't come running to meet their needs. It happens to us when we are ignored, left out, chosen last, overlooked, or bullied. It happens to whole classes and cultures when they are denigrated because of the color of their skin, or their religion, or their sexual orientation, or their political ideology.

Here is the premise of this sermon: Fear has an immense power to steal life from us. Whenever we live with even the slightest fear we are not living into the fullness of the life God gave us. God has blessed each and every one of us ... and God's love is the antidote to that fear. Jesus lived that kind of life ... and it led him to the cross. But even in his death he was living life to the fullest.

I don't know if I have every made a disclaimer about one of my sermons, so this is a first. Although I will be using a hot-button political issue as an example, this isn't about politics. If I offend anyone I apologize beforehand.

First there was the Women's March in Washington just over a year ago. Women, who felt they had and have something to say ... and have felt ignored by the current political system ... gathered to empower each other to speak up in the face of a culture that all too often dismissed them. Then came the #METOO movement of women who had been sexually assaulted and/or harassed speaking their truth to the power of the men who had perpetrated these acts against them. Finally, after another school shooting killing 17 people students have said #ENOUGHISENOUGH. Their elders ... the ones who the students and our whole society has depended upon to provide the leadership that is supposed to be in the best interest of everyone ... and certainly provide safety for our youth so they can grow up without fear ... these elders were and are trivializing and marginalizing these students as they speak truth to power.

Fear has an immense power to steal life from us. However, there comes a time in every life when we have the opportunity to break free from that fear ... even if the cost is high ... even if it means the risk of losing life. Whether it is a woman who wants to be paid an equal wage, or one who has lived with a powerful secret that affects heart and soul, or students who want to live without the threat of horrific violence in their lives, that moment has come. The powers-that-be will always try to ostracize and silence those that want to disrupt the system as it is ... it is a way to kill the movement by wielding the power of existential death.

Let me provide another example on a more personal note. This is a story that Caren has in her book *Healing Words*.

Caren and I were married on September 1, 1990. I was the new Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Toledo, Ohio ... and Caren was very new to the culture of the Episcopal Church. Later in that fall of 1990 the regional Episcopal Church Women ... ECW ... had a luncheon with the bishop in attendance and, of course, they invited the new wife of the new rector to join them.

Caren sat at a table with women from several different churches in the area, and the conversation turned to flower arranging and the florists they chose to supply the flowers. One of the women mentioned that their church used Epstein's Florist, then a woman from another church said, "We don't use them. They are Jewish, and you know how THEY are!"

The way Caren tells it she felt like she had been punched in the stomach ... it took her breath away. These women did not know Caren was Jewish. By the mere comment she had been marginalized because of her faith upbringing. Then she faced the dilemma, do I say something or not? They don't know me. It will be rather awkward and possibly embarrassing. If I say something how might that reflect upon Ted ... the new Rector of St. Mark's.

I imagine that many of us have been in similar situations. Someone tells a racist joke, or makes a gay-bashing comment, or uses some inappropriate sexual innuendo. If we are silent we passively condone the remarks. And if we say something we risk embarrassment, awkwardness, possible even defensive anger ... certainly risking being marginalized or ignored altogether.

Caren, risking all, just said politely, "I am Jewish." There was a long awkward silence at the table. Then the woman who had made the comment said, "I am so sorry," and got up and left. At that point the program began and the chair of the regional ECW began her remarks from the podium. When the meeting was over others apologized for the offensive woman and expressed regret about the incident.

We all want to be alive and recognized by others as being alive. Whether it is the women of our society who have been overlooked and sidelined who march together, or those who have the courage to speak up against men who have used them as sexual objects, or students asking for adults to act like adults, or an individual standing up to a racist, or xenophobic, or homophobic comment, I believe that it is our fear of not being acknowledged that has such an immense power in our lives. Fear of being ostracized or marginalized is what keeps us from speaking out. Wanting to fit in is what keeps us conforming to the social norms even when we know that they are wrong. And finally speaking one's truth is a recognition and acknowledgement of being alive.

Status, wealth, position, title, image, and material possessions ... they are all ways to be recognized, included and therefore to be acknowledged as being alive. But what if we were able to live without that fear of being on the outside ... of not being ignored ... of being of value no matter what others think. The fact is that is exactly what God is telling us. It is the way that Jesus lived his life. He lived the way that Jeremiah predicted: as if "*God's law was within him,*" and as if "*God's law was written on his heart.*" And he did so by word and example. And he did so without concern for whether the religious establishment or the Roman government liked it. He spoke truth to the power of the institutions around him without fear of death ... not existential death and not physical death. In spite of being "*rejected and despised*" God had made Jesus a "*priest of the order of Melchizedek.*"

If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then we will live our lives knowing that the fullness of life comes when we put away our fears. Not only do we exist in the eyes of God, but we are blessed children of God. Regardless of the way we may become marginalized or ostracized by society in general, or our friends, family, and even the ones who we love the most, we will always be loved by God. And it is that love that allows us to speak when it is awkward, uncomfortable, perhaps even somewhat disturbing.

Sometimes we just have to "hate" or "lose" our life in this world ... we have to risk existential death by those around us ... to know the fullness of life ... what John and others call eternal life. If we love this life too much ... so much that we will sell-out our God-given blessedness to be included ... we will lose the very life we are seeking. And, if we live in the fear of being ignored,

or marginalized, or excluded then life is stolen from us ... the very life God gave us and called us to be its stewards.

We are moving into the last days of Jesus' earthly life. Some say that Jesus "bought" life for all of us by dying on the cross. I think Jesus "taught" us that to take Jesus seriously we need to put away our fears ... fears of death ... even existential death ... and live our lives in the blessed assurance that God loves us and wants us to have fullness of life.

Fear has an immense power to steal life from us. Whenever we live with even the slightest fear we are not living into the fullness of the life God gave us. God has blessed each and every one of us and God's love is the antidote to that fear. Jesus lived that kind of life ... and it led him to the cross. But even in his death he was living life to the fullest. And, remember, Good Friday was not ... and is not ... the end of the story.

Amen.