



Palm Sunday, 2018: St. John's Sardis

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Did you hear it? Did you notice it? Did you notice how jubilant Jesus' friends and disciples were in our first Gospel reading this morning, the one we call "the triumphal entry"? And then did you notice in our second Gospel reading (*Mark 15: 1-47*) how these same friends and disciples fell away as things went south, as triumph turned to crucifixion?

On a psychological and spiritual level, this is so true of our own lives that it hurts. We, like the disciples, are delighted at the “triumphal entries” of our lives, but it is harder, much harder simply to stand in the presence of our own inexplicable and seemingly undeserved suffering. We have a hard time simply standing in its presence because on some level we believe that suffering is an interruption in what should be a series of triumphal entries into each phase of our lives.

And, of course there are many, many ways to distance ourselves from inexplicable and undeserved suffering.

When I was the head of staff and operations at an Anglican seminary in the US, part of my job was working with Jerry, the general contractor renovating the seminary’s library, a library chock full of rare books. Jerry and his renovation team had worked very efficiently and had actually saved money on the project. So Jerry, thinking to add a new and exciting component to the project, suggested that the money saved could be used to add a dumb waiter to the project so that library workers could easily transport books from one floor to another. It was a great idea which the leadership at the seminary readily accepted.

However, during the construction of the dumb waiter one of the workers who was welding in the shaft where the dumb waiter was to be placed, caused sparks to fall down onto plastic sheets covering books in the rare book room. These sparks turned into an undetected and smoldering fire that damaged the seminary’s entire rare book collection.

Months and many insurance claims later, Jerry and I met. As we were discussing some of the outstanding claims and what needed to be done next to resolve them, Jerry turned to me and, almost as a throw away comment, said: “Melissa, the one thing I’ve learned in this project is that no good deed goes unpunished.”

“No good deed goes unpunished.” I repeated to myself as our meeting ended and Jerry walked out of my office. “No good deed goes unpunished.”

It was the first time I had ever heard this saying, this way of explaining how a well-intentioned action can backfire. “No good deed goes unpunished.” Yes, there was something true about what he had said. You have a bright idea and it backfires; you try to help someone and you and others end up getting hurt. Jesus comes to bring a message of the nearness of the kingdom of God and ends up getting nailed to the cross. “No good deed goes unpunished.”

But then I thought, “That’s not it; that’s not quite right. The word “punishment” can certainly describe *how it feels to us* when these things happen, but, for me, it cannot be a description of what the cross of Christ is about, and along with that, it cannot be a description of what happens when we put ourselves out there, when we do a good deed in investing ourselves in something or someone, and suffering comes our way.

No, for me, it’s more like this: no engagement and bold offering of ourselves to something greater than ourselves comes without suffering. No vocation worth having, no relationship worth being in, no cause worth dedicating ourselves to comes without an offering of our life’s energy, poured out of us, yes, with some pain, some heartbreak, accompanying it. And

this engagement, this offering, this pouring out of who we are for something or someone else is a holy act that we call “sacrifice,” a word which means “to make holy.”

Growing up I did not like this word at all. It sounded to me like something your mother or your father did for you that later could be used to make you feel guilty. But now, a number of vocations later, two children later, after marriage and many friendships later, what I realize is that what has made my life real and valuable are the times I have given my heart and my life’s energy to something or someone and have laid myself open to the suffering that such giving must bring with it.

And so people of St. John’s, where are you being asked to give your heart in a way that might cause you to suffer? What relationship, what vocation, what situation in your life is calling you to put yourself forward, and in putting yourself forward, put yourself at risk?

Our story of Jesus on the cross, a story of God’s own choice to put God’s self forward and to put God’s self at risk, is the story of our own lives. It’s the story of our saying “yes” to being a parent and the nights of wakefulness and worry that come when we put ourselves forward in this way. It’s the story of our saying “yes” to vocations that push us to become more than we feel capable of being and the days of doubt and trial that come when we put ourselves forward in this way. It’s the story of our saying “yes” to our spouses and the challenge and self-revelation that come when we put ourselves forward in this way.

And, of course, it’s not just in these more personal realms that the story the cross is our own story. For the story of the cross is our story when we say “yes” to walking with Indigenous peoples, to walking with refugees, when we say “yes” to walking with anyone who is not like us. For in walking with those unlike ourselves we will encounter, we will suffer awkwardness, mistakes and painful self-revelation when we put ourselves forth in these ways.

But say “yes” we must, for the same reason that Jesus said yes. “Yes” because to live as a daughter or son of the Most High, to live the fully human life, to live a life authentically and in relationship to the people and the situations we find ourselves in, is to offer our life’s energy, is to give our lives away. And this is the great and holy paradox: that giving our lives away is a way of receiving our lives, that emptying ourselves is a way of being made whole.

And so “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Say “yes” to the people and situations and causes that call out to you for your time, for your energy, for your very life. Say yes, and come alive. Say “yes.”