

“And I, When I Am Lifted Up”
A sermon by Rev. Martin Hager
Scripture: Psalm 51:1-12/John 12:20-33

Prayer: As we proceed through these days of Lent, O God, with our Lord's passion somehow deepened and intensified by what is happening in the world he so loved and for which he died, open us once again to your amazing grace and eternal love. Startle us, O God, with your truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I am remembering this morning, the wonderful people I met during my year in New Mexico. The fifth Sunday in Lent is called Passion Sunday. On that Sunday, when we remember the cross. It is also a day of pilgrimage for all the catholic faithful of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains where Lois and I lived while we served the First Presbyterian Church of Las Vegas, NM as an interim pastor. The unpaved mountain roads were clogged with pilgrims making their way to the basilica in Santa Fe, or to the many “holy places” in the mountains well known to the Hispanic people who have lived there for 500 years. Lois and I learned another way to tell the history of our country through these people. And, through the adoration of Mary, whom they call “Conquistadora” they learned to oppose violence in their life and times by standing in Mary’s sandals as she stood at the foot of the cross.

And as the faithful make that trek up and down the mountain roads, children ask their parents, why are we walking...”because of the cross...” Why the cross? “Because people still suffer and we walk because we want to be by their side.”

In this book *What Jesus Meant*, Garry Wills says:

He preferred the company of the lonely and despised...He crossed lines of ritual impurity to deal with the unclean, the lepers, the possessed, the insane, the prostitutes and adulterers, and collaborators..He was called a bastard...He had a lower-class upbringing...chose his followers from the lower class. Jesus not only favored the homeless, he was himself homeless...He was in constant danger of being arrested and assassinated...was called an agent of the devil...consorter with loose women, a glutton and a drunkard..The puzzled disciples trotted behind, trying to make sense of what seemed to them inexplicable, squabbling among themselves about that he was up to. It would never have occurred to them to wear a WWJD bracelet.

This morning, we have before us an odd little story. Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. They ask Philip. Philip tells Andrew and Philip and Andrew tell Jesus, “There are some Greeks looking for you.” Jesus responds with a little story about a grain of wheat remaining just that, a single grain, unless it falls to the earth and dies, and then it produces much fruit. And then he teaches: those who love their lives, maintain the status quo, protect and conserve their lives, will lose them. But those who hate their lives – elsewhere he says, “lose their lives for my sake” – will find them, will have eternal life, real life, full life. It is one of the consistent motifs in the New Testament. If you want to live, really live, you have to learn to give your life away, have to learn how to die.

And then this haunting statement, which over the years I have always found so compelling: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

When it happened, when he was lifted up from the earth, when he lived out the parable of the grain of wheat dying in order to live, when Jesus of Nazareth in the full bloom of young adulthood, was crucified, something decisive, something compelling, something the human race has never been able to forget or ignore, happened.

The cross is the central symbol of our faith, of course. It adorns our churches, hospitals, and health care organizations. It’s perhaps the most popular item of jewelry in the whole history of jewelry. There are crosses on gold chains, crosses of gold and silver and wood. There are red, white, and blue crosses, crosses adorned with diamonds, crosses on rings, on pins, tie clasps.

There are tattoo crosses. If you walk into the Ringling Museum in Sarasota and bypass the Impressionists and wander into the Renaissance – something everybody should do during Lent – you will discover that the death of Jesus on a cross is something like the central event in the history of art.

Think of it, all the Masses and Requiems – Bach, Mozart modern Masses – all composed around this event: his being lifted up and drawing all people to him. Think of the gorgeous hymns:”

“O Sacred Head now wounded...What language shall I borrow to thank thee dearest friend?

“Oh, who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?... This is my friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.”

“Why I survey the wondrous cross”

“Beneath the cross of Jesus”

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

Great writers are compelled – even non Christians...

The late Norman Mailer, who was a secular Jew who found the symbol of the cross nonetheless compelling wrote, with amazing insight the story of Jesus in the first person”

“They drove a spike into each of my wrists and another spike through each of my feet. I did not cry out. But I saw the heavens divide...They raised the cross from the ground, and it was as if I climbed higher and into a greater pain. This pain traveled across a space as vast as the seas.” (The Gospel According to the Son, p. 220)

Ernest Hemingway – no friend of institutional Christianity – could not ignore the figure of Jesus, particularly his crucifixion. In an amazing short story, “Today is Friday,” three roman soldiers are drinking in a bar after a particularly difficult Friday afternoon. They are rough, crude. One is not feeling well. The bartender gives him something for his stomach.

“Jesus Christ,” he says.

“He was pretty good in there,” another responds.

“Why didn’t he come down off the cross?”

“He didn’t want to come down.”

“Show me a guy who doesn’t want to come down off a cross,” the first soldier says. “I see a lot of them.

Any time you show me one that doesn’t want to get down off the cross when the time comes – I’ll climb right up with him.”

And the other ways, “I thought he was pretty good in there today.” (The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, p. 356)

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Part of what has been so compelling about it is the sense that it didn’t have to happen. He could have avoided it. He could have stayed in the safety of Galilee instead of going to Jerusalem for the Passover. They didn’t have to go to the very place where those who hated him were prominent and powerful. He didn’t have to enter the city in a way that was provocative: riding in on a donkey in the very way the messiah was promised to come. He didn’t have to go to the temple and upset the tables of the merchants and moneychangers. He could have fought back and tried to escape when the soldiers arrested him. He easily could have mounted a defense in front of the secret court that tried him, easily could have argued that he meant no harm. And he could at least have tried to convince Pilate, the Roman governor, that he certainly meant no disrespect to Rome or Caesar; that he had only a few unarmed peasants for followers. Pilate seems to have wanted to be convinced to set him free, anyway.

He did none of that. And the people who have thought much about it, the scholars and the historians, as they have tried to pin down the reasons for his execution – how he alienated powerful people in his own religious community, how he irritated the Romans – conclude finally that a major reason for his death was his own intentionality. Either he meant to die, or he meant to live with a consistent integrity that made his death inevitable. Which is another way of saying that he really meant it when he said, “If you want to keep your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will find it. British theologian N.T. Wright wrote that

“crucifixion was a powerful symbol throughout the Roman world. It was not just a means of liquidating someone: it did so with a maximum of degradation and humiliation. It said, loud and clear, “We’re in charge here; you are our property: we can do what we like with you.” (Christian Century, Easter 2003).

He died, I believe, because he refused to make the thousand and one compromises we think are required to live, to make do, to cope. He died, because he truly believed that the way to real life – eternal life, he called it – is to live for others. He died because, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s memorable phrase, he was “the Man for Others.”

He died for his people – poor, oppressed by Rome, persecuted, trampled on. He identified with them. He identified with all the nobodies of the world of all ages, who are not in control of their destinies: the poor, the homeless, the weak, the powerless. He believed that the weakest are not well defended through violence – that those who live by the sword, die by it. And that is why throughout all of human history, the poor and weak have always understood the crucifixion, perhaps better than anyone else.

He identifies with all those who know they are not in control: those whose lives and deaths are in the control of huge forces and movements.

And, as we pass the sixth anniversary of the War in Iraq, there stands the cross amid the estimated 1,320,110 deaths due to the US invasion, the 346 Iraqi civilians killed in February of 2009, the 4,259 US casualties, the 31,131 wounded in action, the 24 soldiers who committed suicide in January of 2009. There stands the cross casting its shadow over Iraqi women and children, desperate frightened, caught in the middle of enormous ego-political forces over which they have not a stitch of control.

And the cross casts its shadow on the US Marines, soldiers, and pilots obeying orders, in harm’s way this morning, doing their duty, having to make precarious instantaneous life and death decisions.

At the foot of the cross are the critically ill in hospitals and intensive care wards, no longer in control, subjected to surgeons, technicians, viruses, malignancies, chemotherapy.

At the foot of the cross are people who live with relentless pain, people who are sick and dying.

That’s who Jesus identified with and that’s who understands him; that’s who turns to him, that’s who awaits his loving embrace.

He died to show us that when our lives seem out of control for whatever reason, there is one who knows, understands, and draws us to himself. He died, I believe, to teach us how to live: to call us out of selfishness; to show us how really to live by loving passionately, by caring deeply, by giving our love, our resources to others, to causes that matter.

“We hunger, not just to be loved but to love,” Frederick Buechner wrote. “When Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, it was not just for our neighbor’s sake, but for our own sakes as well.” (The Longing for Home, p. 138).

When I was a pastor in Houston, a bright wonderful young couple, public school teachers, lost their precious little sixteen month old baby daughter Cindy. Cindy was full of life, curious about everything, laughed easily and often, was affectionate and bright, and she died tragically. The couple were members of my congregation, and what they did and said inspired me.

In the midst of the horrible shock of their baby's death and their overwhelming grief, they had to make a very difficult decision. Cindy had been so healthy; the doctors told them that her heart and lungs were desperately needed and could be used for transplants. The couple, in their tears, thought about it – not very long actually – prayed about it talked it over, made their decision and agreed to allow the doctors to proceed.

A few days later at the memorial service, the sanctuary was nearly full: their friends, family, family friends, colleagues from the high school. The young man and woman wanted to speak to the gathered community. The father thanked everyone for coming and thanked everyone for all the love and prayers and said that it had somehow made the past several days possible for his wife and him. And then the Cindy's mother spoke out of her immeasurable grief about her sixteen month old daughter who was gone, but she said she was comforted and strengthened by the love and prayers of everyone but particularly by the thought that there were several babies who would live now and grow and be children and adolescents and adults and maybe get married and have children of their own because our Cindy, our baby died.

It was a moment of truth – terrible, beautiful, frightening and painful truth, like the moment Jesus said, "If a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it bears much fruit."

Why did Jesus die?

He died because he really believed that in living for others, we become the men and women God created us to be.

He died to show us how to live: to save us from our sins, we say, but what he meant was that we don't need to live crippled by guilt and past regrets. The cross covers, pays for, redeems everything we have done to separate ourselves from God and others. But more than that even. He died to save our souls from the narrow confines of our own selfishness. He died to call us out of our self-concern, our stress and anxiety about careers and how much money we earn, to a life lived in the glorious freedom of his love.

He died to show us that we need never be afraid of anything or any one.

"And," he said, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Amen.