

Now update

Pentecost XIII – 2023

So we have Paul this morning sounding much like the Sermon on the Mount.

And we have Jesus reminding us of the cost of such a life.

We are reading constantly the saints in our home—with our children. Between basketball and piano lessons and Eucharists and volleyball games and baseball practices and throwing suppers together and mom's in the hospital, we get about a saint a week in. And that's good. We'll take it. Most recently, St. Barbara of Egypt. Second century. Her tutor was the evangelist, and she a martyr at the hands of her own father. A mom who died at her birth; dad consigned her to the home/palace where she lived. She wrote to Origin of Alexandria for instruction, and he sent a 'gardener' who presented her with a New Testament. While her father is away, he instructs a two-window pane to be installed, and instead she switches it to three windows in hopes that she can give him a picture of how the light of the Trinity floods our lives. He flies into a rage, and before he realizes what he's doing, she is gone at his own hand. She had been a Christian but for a few days.

These kinds of stories fill the pages—not only of Scripture—but of the stories of the saints. Tough, inspiring, heavy, unnecessary, courageous. I just love reading these stories to my babies.

In addition to our Lord's words this morning, I think of two passages of Scripture as well; Hebrews 11 and II Corinthians 4:

³¹ By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two,^[a] they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also for Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you.

And so there it is. And for what cause? What is so punishable about this? Why the promised suffering? Why the misunderstanding for 2,000 years? Why does Jesus feel the need to get out in front of this? Did you read Paul? These are good things to which we have been called! I'm a good neighbor! (read Paul again).

Epistle: Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Why the cross ever before us?? I'm just trying to rejoice in hope—not in present circumstance (thank you Paul). I'm just attempting patience amidst suffering—not mere for future success (thank you Paul). I'm applying as much perseverance as I can in prayer—not in routing my

enemies. So why the rebuke from Jesus to Peter when Peter denies his suffering? And why the reminder that we need to keep that same cross in view at all times????

You'll forgive a silly example, but it was the one that kept coming to mind in penning this homily. We have a shelf in our kitchen that loves to fall down. Cookbooks are heavy, it would seem. I've nailed this thing back ten times. We finally called someone who knows how wood works. Apparently I'm only good at sacraments. One frustrated Saturday afternoon I found myself attempting to straighten one of the nails, because I needed one more and was out of new ones (think boating example – tony). Straightening a nail is near impossible. Despite owning many hammers, having degrees in stuff; despite years of life experience and having a usable human body—I couldn't get the nail straight again. Beat it to death. Still crooked. Unwinding and unbending warped steel requires conditions I was unable to recreate.

A bent world is infinitely more complex, and it will fight back. A bent world will not understand the hammer. A bent world accustomed only to darkness will flee from the light. The cure hurts. And to the degree that your life is in cooperation with the cure, the same will flee you. It might even chase us to the top of a mountain and impale you, just as Barbara's father did in his unwitting rage (that he no doubt regretted). And so the life of faith on the surface has an elegant simplicity. Life in peace. Say your prayers. Perform acts of mercy to your enemies when they treat you with pure injustice. But Jesus doesn't lie to us. Count the cost. The world will not always understand, and the goads will prick you when you simply thought you were rejoicing in hope.

This week is the 60th anniversary of the "I Have a Dream" speech. So let me end with the words of MLK:

"I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..... This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

He spoke for 17 minutes. Our Lord spoke but a few sentences. We still walk it out.

At this altar, everything needed is already provided. Simple prayer? It is here. Peace with our every brother and sister? It is here. Day to bear your cross in persecution? He's already done it for you and provides you now with the benefits of his redemption. And who joins you in taking in these spiritual energies? Not the strong who are ready for the fight. Not the deserving and the worthy. Those barely making it. Those with one last prayer. Those who no longer know what hope is, much less how to rejoice. Those, like St. Barbara and Martin Luther King, whose lives are extinguished well before the prime of their lives. And those of us who, amidst it all, are just trying to overcome the next evil with a bit of good. Jesus is near to those who walked in with crosses this morning.

In the name...