

**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent
RCL Lectionary, Year B
March 8th, 2009**

**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

Skin in the Game

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Last weekend, I took Daniel to attend his first school dance at Edna Maguire. It might be worth a whole sermon talking about Kindergarteners going to school dances, and the fact that Daniel, rather than dancing, wore himself out chasing classmates around the room! But what really surprised me was that next to the tables laid out with goodies to buy, raising money for a charity serving children in Ethiopia, was a small table covered in a display of crystals. Two people were there showing the various sizes, shapes, and colors to young eager eyes – my son’s among them – and I noticed literature on the table expressing how these crystals brought balance and energy to those who carried them.

Now I’ve lived in the Bay Area for almost ten years, and I’m already into my third year in Marin, but I still had to speak to the puzzled Midwesterner inside me and say, “Richard, we’re not in Kansas anymore!”

I was not as much offended by the crystals as fascinated by my inner dialogue – a dialogue provoked by the scene of a spiritual tradition on display – marketed in a way – in a public school. What would happen, I wondered, if we showed up at a school dance and set up a booth next to the New Age one with prayer books... or Bibles... or icons... or mini labyrinths? What if our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers had been there with rosaries? Or our Jewish kin with Minorahs, copies of Torah, Haggadah, or the Talmud; or our Islamic neighbors with the Koran? Well. . .you can imagine as well as I can the uproar and the headlines in the *Marin Independent Journal* if we attempted this.

But crystals, I realized, are safe. New Age is part of the Marin scene in any case, almost as ubiquitous as the Redwoods. In our milieu where the mostly unspoken mantra is that we are “spiritual but not religious,” crystals can be safe and even comforting because they demand relatively little but our natural admiration of beauty. And the grace they afford by bringing balance and energy asks – at least at the surface – little of us in the way of true accountability.

But, in case your wondering, I’m not here this morning to score easy points against New Age spirituality. For we in the Episcopal Church tend to be not much better than asking for insipid and uninspired commitment a good deal of the time. I had to check my own marked hesitation in asking if we could set up a Church of Our Saviour booth at the next public school event. I really don’t feel I want to die in that ditch. It would probably, in a good Anglican sense, create a rather disordered mess. But how does that scan in light of Jesus’ hard words in today’s Gospel about acknowledging him before others?

Indeed, we in the Episcopal Church have historically tended to be quite bashful about our tradition and even taken pride in *not* getting out in the world with our faith. Instead we have spent a lot of energy admiring the beauty of our own liturgies, revering the facets of our careful polity, the complex processes by which we make prayerful decisions. While I was poking around the Diocese of California’s website Friday morning, I clicked a link to find information regarding our convention in October. Without apology or any more notable context, the brief announcement read: “The business of the 2009 convention will be focused primarily on legislation enabling the convention date to move from the third weekend in October to the last weekend in January.”

I was mystified. Surely this is not what the author meant to say! But the visage – I pray only imagined – of calling a diocesan-wide meeting to decide to schedule another diocesan-wide meeting... well just the idea unearthed for me the more embarrassing side of the institutional church... and the bumbling, bureaucratic, and often scandalous history of ecclesiastical fiddling while the world burns. And therefore, all the more today's Gospel rightly leaves me quaking in my title, collar, and vestments, when Jesus essentially asks his disciples and all of us, lay and ordained, across the centuries of tradition: "Just how much skin do you *really* have in this game?"

Peter, in his indomitably human way, wants it easy just like the rest of us: the kudos without the investment, the salvation without the sacrifice, the transformation without the giving over of self. Jesus, in Peter's mind at least, needs to stick around long enough to accomplish everything *for* us. So keep him away from Jerusalem for as long as possible – forever if we have anything to say about it. We, like Peter, want Christ enshrined on the mountaintop more like a guru or the gods of old than a fleshly, vulnerable man offering his own blood to the corrupt and powerful running the show. Because we know an offering like that will most probably mean death. . . and more than a bit of a disordered mess.

Jesus minces no words when he confronts Peter's very human, but also very limiting spiritual cowardice. In a way, Peter embodies all of the temptations that Jesus himself must have encountered as he pondered the journey ahead. So his invocation of Satan, a personification of all temptation and accusation, while cutting in the extreme, should not really surprise us all that much... even as it stuns many of our tender, sensitive, good Anglican ears. It's meant to shake Peter out of his illusions about what is meant to happen around this strange Messianic figure who is intent on turning everything upside-down – even if that means turning upside-down the conventional notions of Messianic figures. Shattered are the illusions about how God works in the world: for God works not by showering gifts for the good from on high and wrath on the evil, but by being born among us and standing toe-to-toe with the distortions and false powers that blight our lives. A God who dies, and then, in the words of our beautiful, but prescient Eucharistic prayer this day, delivers us "from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal."

For the God of Jesus, Abraham, and Sarah is not just a God of beauty, displayed before us like so many attractive crystals for the taking – to bring balance and energy. Nor is ours merely an insipid and uninspired God of our tendencies to be "spiritual, but not religious." Ours is a God who engages our sufferings and shortcomings with a tangible spirituality, our entire life at every level with a grace that refuses to leave us where we are, a blood and flesh religion that demands we get our skin in the game of salvation – to plant our bodies as well as our hearts and minds in the way of the death-dealing machinery of this world so that we may help usher in the life of the next... to walk to Jerusalem bearing our crosses and to die to them with Christ, so that we may be renewed and free.

Just how much skin we put in the game of salvation is a question worthy of Lent, worthy of our pondering, wrestling, and prayer, worthy of cutting words and hard truths... worthy, at least it seems to me, of the People of God. *Amen.*