

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 19

RCL Lectionary, Year B

Isaiah 50:4-9a / Psalm 116:1-8 / James 3:1-12 / Mark 8:27-38

September 13th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Crosses and Obedience

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

When Jesus drops this teaching on his disciples, and, by extension, us this day, we are cast into perhaps the greatest mystery and greatest challenge of our walk with our Savior. Peter has just identified him as the Messiah, but then we quickly learn that Peter has – as usual – everything somehow wrong. Perhaps Peter thinks Jesus has come to shut down all the problems of life, make an end to the political occupation of Roman Empire, usher in a new King for Israel, and restore the land of flowing milk and honey. But when Jesus starts talking about going to Jerusalem to face crucifixion, Peter is so upset he pulls Jesus aside and begins to berate him for such talk. Jesus makes no bones in reply, accusing Peter of representing the heart of all temptation, and then offers us this zinger about taking up our cross – everything we have suffered, our faults, our pains, whatever weighs us down – and following. . .and losing our life to save it. . . This cross which forms the intersection of both the greatest hopes and greatest tragedies of our lives and the life of the world – perhaps even the universe itself. . . This cross that sits right at the heart of our tradition. . . And we are called to take it up.

Tomorrow, in the feast calendar of The Episcopal Church, is Holy Cross Day. Most of us will go about our business unaware that the day holds any special significance. But a handful of our sisters and brothers across the wider Church will gather for special services, prayers, and devotions. Holy Cross Day marks the foundation day of at least two orders in The Episcopal Church: The Order of the Holy Cross, which was founded in 1881, and the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, which was founded in 1969. Both orders are relatively small in the grand scheme of things, but their path of life is ancient, dating back to some of the earliest Christian communities and writings.

So I want to explore some this day with you the cross we call holy, and explore it through the lens of monastic tradition. As my new spiritual director, a member of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory said to me the other day, there's something a bit romantic in most people's minds about monastic communities and Christians living under vows. We imagine habit-wearing monks and nuns sitting in lush gardens contemplating the deep mysteries of faith. But in my walk with these communities over the past ten years, I can tell you they experience the same fights, disagreements, and challenges of living in community as we all do.

And when we're not romanticizing about monastics, we sometimes – particularly in the West – look at them a bit cross-eyed. Giving over lives to vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience seems to undercut our individually tailored spiritual lives, our self-possession to which we so tightly cling. And let's not even get started about obedience. My goodness, isn't that word enough to get some of us searching for the nearest exit? (Don't look now, but obedience is actually part of our baptismal covenant. . .)

But it's precisely this kind of self-offering obedience that Jesus is speaking about in today's Gospel – precisely this kind of life that our monastic sisters and brothers embrace and attempt to integrate into their deepest hearts. . .precisely this kind of life, in fact, to which we are all called.

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Ten years ago this month, when housing across the Bay Area was scarce and fiendishly expensive at the height of the dot com boom, a young woman from Japan found inexpensive housing and shelter at Incarnation Priory in Berkeley, where the Order of the Holy Cross offered low-rent housing for students. A young seminarian who was taking spiritual direction from the Prior at the house met her next door at All Souls' Parish and took her flowers a few weeks later and they were married within a year.

All right, that's about as romantic as I'm going to get on you all today. I promise not to get all mushy on you! Yes, the seminarian was me, and yes, I was talking about how I met my wife, Hiroko. But we owe our marriage in no small part to the hospitality of the Order of the Holy Cross, and the way they welcomed her and me – both newcomers in the crazy mixed-up life of Berkeley, California – and offered stability in the Benedictine tradition, based on a rule of life – a way of taking up the cross together in community; a way, in fact, that goes back to the dawn of Christian history. This is what obedience in that community is all about.

Truth is, more than just owing my marriage in no small away to the Benedictine tradition and a handful of monastics, most of our parish life is based on Benedictine principles. We, in this place, provide hospitality for the spiritual sojourner, the seeker, the people hungry for community, for connection. We set aside some of our earthly treasure, our energy, our focus, our personal ambition – indeed our lives – so that this place may thrive and bring life for others. This parish is a witness to the path of the Holy Cross in that way – and, frankly, that's a way of obedience, too.

The spooky thing is we almost completely lost the monastic way in our shared Anglican Christian tradition at its beginning. As Henry VIII in the sixteenth century was making his break with Rome, he closed and ransacked the monastic communities all over England – in part to quell dissent for his actions; in part to take lands and treasures that would help him and his government in their political aspirations.

For nearly three hundred years, monasticism was essentially dead in our Anglican tradition. The keeping of a ruled community had been wiped from our Anglican consciousness, except when we encountered it amongst our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. It was only in the nineteenth century with the revival of some of our Catholic roots in England and here in the United States that Orders for Christian men and women began to return to our religious life as Christians.

In recent years, a fascinating growth has been starting in many orders of the Episcopal Church. In the face of all the hyper-individualism, financial meltdowns, economic downturns and troubles of our age, the Franciscans, for instance, in San Francisco (and now Berkeley) are swelling in numbers. Across the Anglican Communion, Orders are springing up all over the place. Something about living as deeply as possible into the path of the cross has drawn men and women into vows that were long dormant in our Church's life. And this is no romanticism.

Living this life in a community of Christians – be it a priory, retreat house, monastery, or parish – can be tough, as anyone knows. When the Montecito Fire completely destroyed Mount Calvary Retreat House and Monastery above Santa Barbara last Fall, the monks of the Order of the Holy Cross lost one of their three primary homes. Those living there had only their cars, habits, and a few worldly possessions. Nothing romantic about that, really. They were like all those who had lost their houses in that great fire, years of history and memory blown about as ashes by the Santa Ana winds.

But even as the monks were in the midst of day-to-day seeking a path out of the devastation, my former spiritual director, Br. Tom, called from Santa Barbara and simply said in a voicemail message: "Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty. . ." Years of the challenges of living in intentional community under vows had taught him the joy of today's Gospel teaching – of obeying the call to travel so light that not even devastation and death can end the life of faith, the life in Christ. The cross was no longer a burden, but a way of freedom.

Jesus asks us today, "For what will it profit [us] to gain the whole world and forfeit [our] life? Indeed, what can [we] give in return for [our] life?" For the inspiration to set aside our sometimes selfish appetites and ambitions for a life of Christian service, we turn to the examples of our sisters and brother who live in ruled community. We look to the example of their obedience. . . For their deliberate setting aside the great aspiration of individualism in the West and giving themselves over to something external to themselves, something external but life-giving. Something external, like the Gospel, that they then spend their lives taking into themselves – transformed, as we are called to be transformed – by the One who laid down his life, that we might be given the path to eternal life.

This day, as we celebrate similar lives of service in our parish – from our beloved Michelle Walker to our new teachers and leaders in all of our Sunday School programs getting their start today; to the hours spent in cultivating community and music in our choir; to the countless hours our leadership on our Vestry spends in keeping this place open in ancient Benedictine fashion – we celebrate the path of the cross, the path of Christian obedience, the path to which Jesus has called each and every one of us. I ask you to ponder that, and set a singular but all-important spiritual goal in the coming weeks and months. And that goal is to identify yet another way you will pick up your cross and follow after your Lord and Master, your Teacher, your Healer, God's Word incarnate in our midst. . .and set aside, with a measure of obedience in your heart, those things that are perishing, so that you may fully embrace what is True, Just, and eternal.