



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Who does that__ - The Twenty First Sunday After Pentecost- 10_17_2021

Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was in seminary at Duke, I had the privilege of studying with Dr. Peter Storey. Probably none of you've heard of him, but he worked alongside Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa during the years of fighting apartheid. And when I say fighting, I mean, fighting. There were bullets flying, there were kidnappings, there were death threats and he was the Bishop of the Methodist church in South Africa. And actually, while he became the president of the whole South African Council of Churches, which encompassed all the churches in South Africa, Desmond Tutu was his secretary.

So in class at seminary, he would tell us about these harrowing stories of being held up at gunpoint with Tutu and being jailed and so on and so forth - all those things that you normally naturally go through when you're fighting for a noble cause and giving yourself over for that. And what strikes me about Christians like Peter's story or Desmond Tutu or Martin Luther King or those kinds of folks is they take seriously Jesus' challenge to become the servant and slave of all. Somewhere along their faith journey, they decided, or they felt called to a self-sacrificial life. They gave up security. They gave up the road to ease, this comfort or calm, all to take on a life of service and a life fighting for justice for others that was at a great cost to them and their families.

Who does that? Is there something unusual or other worldly about a person who's willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of many? Is that the calling of every Christian? Who willingly sacrifices themselves for the sake of others? The self-sacrificial life is very costly because your suffering is meant to help others. And it's completely and solely at your expense.

In the book of Isaiah, we read the excruciating poem about the suffering servant, someone whose sacrifice is so great it almost seems humanly impossible to do. And who could bear such a burden? And I think because of that, we Christians naturally say that if someone's going to be suffering like this, it has to be Jesus. So, listen again. This is from Isaiah.

"Surely He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him as stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our

transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

Who else could that be? Screaming Jesus! I actually wondered was there another way to read this? So I reached out to Rabbi Megan Brudney who is one of the rabbis at temple Bethel. That's the place that we have our offices right now as the church is under construction. So we have a wonderful relationship with the temple. And I said to her, how do Jews read this text? Because they don't scream Jesus when they read it, right? So what do they see in it? How does their reading of the text indicate to them what a human being is called to do? Is there an expectation for a Jew to be like the lamb who was led to the slaughter without being able to say a word?

Rabbi Megan, she's a wonderful theologian. She's a great teacher and just an extraordinary human being. I really like her. And she's actually going to be joining Women's Spirituality Group in May, 2022 to lead us on a season of Judaism. So I invite you, if you're interested in learning more about her and get to know her better, to participate in that.

So I said to her, okay, who's the suffering servant here? Is this an imaginary figure? And I found out that for Jews, the reading points to the Nation of Israel were representative of the Nation of Israel, that's one who's willing to be scapegoated for the sake of not just Israel, but for the sake of the whole entire world. So one rabbi says, by suffering for others, the Jewish people make it possible for creation to endure.

But rabbi Megan went on, she said passages like these remind her of the many songs of suffering that exist in the Bible in the Book of Lamentations, the plight that Israel naturally faces, the people of God, because even those who are faithful to God, experience suffering. There is this thread in the Jewish tradition that the faithful and suffering go hand in hand and Jews know what it means to go through this because remember today's Jew is reading this post Holocaust. So they actually understand when Isaiah says they were “cut off from the land of the living; stricken for the transgression of their people.” They don't need to use their imagination when Isaiah warns them that they will be buried among the wicked and the rich, though they committed no violence.

For Jews, this text hits way too close to home. But what struck me about that very honest and very painful interpretation of this text by our Jewish friends is that the suffering, it wasn't a choice. Those who went through Auschwitz, they were suffering servants for sure. But there was no intent. There was no will behind it. What chills me about the Book of Isaiah and what chills me about what Jesus says to us is that this person actually chooses to live a self sacrificial life. Take on this painful, lonely, difficult way like Dr. Storey or Desmond Tutu or Martin Luther King. And I don't know about you, but I'm still left with the same question. Who does this willingly? Who sacrifices themselves for the sake of others?

And if we look really closely at our gospel reading, we'll see we're not alone in asking this question. James and John are unwittingly asking it themselves. Now I don't know about you. I don't relate to the suffering servant, but I sure as heck relate to James and John, because they're looking for opportunities, right? And they're like, all right, we understand that we need to do some suffering here with you, Jesus, but once we get this done, right hand, left hand, we got this. I get that. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. The early bird gets the worm. There is favoritism in this world.

So the sons of thunder, as Jesus loved to call them - the sons of thunder, James and John, sure they'll undergo of their own volition a little suffering because it will lead to their success. So they say to Jesus, grant us to sit one on your left and one at your right. When you come into your glory. And Jesus says to them, you don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup that I'm drinking from? Can you be baptized with the baptism I have? They said, yes, we're able. In fact, both actually end up following Jesus in heart, mind, and body. The Apostle James, he's the first apostle martyred. In the book of Acts it says that Herod ran a sword through him. And John, that's the John of Patmos who was exiled and lived the rest of his life in the wilderness forever.

Neither of these apostles escaped difficulties or tribulations in their lives. And they do, why? So that they can go and proclaim the gospel to others, the gospel that they already knew about. What changed them? What made them believe what Jesus said to him, that whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. And really, it doesn't really matter what changes James and John, what matters is the litmus test between you and me. Are we willing to sacrifice?

Like you I've spent my whole life trying to figure out what motivates me. What motivates me to do good? What motivates me to give myself sacrificially? What makes me refuse to give or harden my heart to the needs around me? I'm convinced that there are four things that lead me to a sacrificial life. And the first one is Jesus. I have to say, I am deeply, profoundly grateful to be a Christian because frankly, that suffering servant text, I don't ever want to be that person. In fact, I don't want any human being to be able to be capable of bearing the sins of the world, because if any of us can do it, then we have a higher standard to live by.

But no, I believe it when my faith says there is nothing that we human beings could do to save us. There was no way that we could have extricated ourselves from evil, that we could have prevented sin from staining our lives. There is nothing that we can do to save us. And so God became flesh and became one of us and took on our infirmities, took on all of our sins, took on all the problems that we have created and said, I will take them on. I will expunge them. I will forgive you. I will free you. Hallelujah for Jesus Christ! And I am so grateful for

Jesus that that makes me want to change my heart. I don't want to have a small selfish heart. I want a big one. I want one that's expansive with the amazing gift that Christ has given me. I want it to be full so it's not about my needs, my desires, myself.

I have to tell you I've spent half of my life being not Christian and the other half being Christian. And it's very interesting to compare the two. I'm like a walking experiment. And, in fact, my parents weren't Christian. My sister's not Christian. So I have this whole kind of nice data set to look at. And my parents and sisters, they're good people and I was a good person before I was Christian, but there was a limit to my sacrifice. There was a limit to how much I would do for the sake of others. What is now normal and natural to me, what I am able to do to give on behalf of others has radically changed.

Now, I am no suffering servant, but I make sacrifices for the sake of others that would have seemed unfathomable to me before I was a Christian. And I know what's changed between then and now - my heart. God has given me a more tender heart. My heart's bigger. It's more expansive. It has a place for grace and peace.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right spirit within me”

The third thing that God gives me - Jesus, my heart, and this third thing. This third thing is actually probably the most untapped potential of mine. And maybe it's yours too. It's mercy, showing mercy to others. In the church, we talk about love all the time. I talk about love all the time. But I'm not sure that love motivates me to sacrifice.

We have this person who's chronically homeless, who calls the church regularly asking for help. And in fact, he called this past week and I paid attention to what was motivating me to do whatever I wanted to do or didn't do. And he called on this super busy day where I had no time. And I saw his name pop up on my screen and you know what I did, I groaned and rolled my eyes and I thought, oh God, not today. And I was paying attention to why I answered his phone call. He needs assistance, as usual. It wasn't love for this man that motivated me to figure out what to do. It was mercy. The definition of mercy is to show compassion or forgiveness to someone that you could very easily punish or hurt or in this case ignore. And indeed, guess what? Mercy is what God is showing to you and to me. Mercy motivates me to sacrifice. What does mercy do to you?

The fourth and final motivation that I need to be self-sacrificial was taught to me, not by Dr. Peter Storey, who was that sacrificial seminary professor from South Africa, but by his wife, Elizabeth, who I had the privilege of having lunchtime with occasionally during my time at seminary. And she has since died and joined the saints in glory. But I'll never forget our time together because she was very, very

generous and she let me ask really intrusive questions about her life with Dr. Storey.

And I was like, okay, I just want to understand, how do you do this? How do you live in this time bomb, where you feel like something could happen at any moment? She had four kids that she was raising and they had regularly death threats made to their house and their family. And I was just like, how do you manage to live under such danger and death attacks? Don't you want to run away? And she said to me, I made it a practice not to worry because I had faith that God was caring for us.

She managed her anxiousness and her fear that comes with the sacrificial life because she had a profound trust that God held her and her husband and her family and all of God's creation in His hands. And so that she could rest and thrive and have faith in the midst of so much uncertainty and bad news. So the fourth motivation that I need is my faith, my trust that God is going to take care of me no matter how much I give, no matter how much I lose, no matter how costly it is and that this God will care for me in my sacrifice and in my suffering.

Now we are going to learn more about faith directly after this service at the Thrive Forum, the Sunday Forum that Father Bill is going to lead. And I suggest that you come to that because we can all grow in our faith.

So I'm going to return to my question. Who willingly sacrifices themselves for others? Well, if you are amazed and astounded at Jesus Christ and what Jesus has managed to do for you and the whole world without anything that you had to do. And if you have this heart that you keep giving over to God and saying, God, make me bigger, make me love more, make me be able to give more. And if you are cultivating the gift of mercy, of being able to take all those things that you're really good at and hand it to others so that you can serve them and be a slave to them. And if you have faith that you can trust God, no matter what you do, well, here's the answer: you. You are willing to sacrifice for the sake of others. And thanks be to God that's the answer. Amen.