

Sermons at Christ Church

A rise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Pentecost XXIII

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Creator God, you formed us from the dust of the earth, and reveal your fingerprints in all flesh. Teach us your deep wisdom in the order and beauty of all that you have made. When our care for your creation is found wanting, reprove and reform us, so that our footprints may be more gentle on the earth, tending and keeping it as your own handiwork. Amen.

There stood the beautiful temple. It was enormous. It could take thousands of people. Millions were the people who had been there to worship. It had also known some woes, it was destroyed, and had been rebuilt. Millions were those who came to seek the face of God and to offer sacrifices at the temple. Many were those who simply came to admire the beauty of the temple. If they had smart phones back then, people would have taken selfies and posted them on Snap chat, Facebook or Instagram. Decorated in gold and beautiful stones and resplendent, it was the center of Jewish religious identity. People were right in their claim about the gifts dedicated to the glory of God. The only issue is, everything was dedicated to the glory of God except themselves. For some reason, they missed the reality of themselves as beautiful gifts dedicated to the glory of God. St. Irenaeus once noted that ‘the glory of God is a human being fully alive.’ It is when we are alive that the glory of God becomes manifest. And we become alive, as Paul said, when we do not grow weary in doing what is right. We become alive when the cost involved in doing what is right is not enough to dissuade us from that task.

I remember as a teenager going to my friend’s house to watch the movie ‘Do the right thing.’ My friends and I were enchanted by the phrase ‘Always do the right thing,’ and we imitated some of the stuff we saw in the movie. We wondered what life in New York City would be like, more to the point we wondered what it meant to always do the right thing. As teenagers it wasn’t easy to do the right thing, we were sometimes promiscuous, and as we sit here, we can also acknowledge that it isn’t always easy to do the right thing, nor is it even popular or fashionable to sometimes do the right thing. But we know all too well that without overcoming those inherent difficulties in doing what is right, we may not come to understand our own potential, or in the words of Irenaeus, we may never be alive enough to exude the glory of God.

St. Paul reminds us of a unique universal struggle, I do not understand what I do, he says, for what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate to do that is what I end up doing. Frederick Faber-a nineteenth century Roman Catholic in his beautiful poem 'Oh It is hard to work for God'-which has been set to a hymn writes, "Oh, it is hard to work for God to rise and take His part, upon the battlefield of earth and not sometimes lose heart." Faber concludes his poem with these words "For right is right as God is God and right the day must win, to doubt will be disloyalty, to falter were to sin." For both Paul and Faber, the earth is God's battlefield, and the fact still remains that pursuing the task of God is difficult. It is wearisome, it is tasking. It can be irksome. It can be irritating-especially during Stewardship season. But we cannot lose heart because right must win the day.

If right must win the day, then the question for our consideration this morning is, is there any value, any one loyalty that stands taller than your enduring loyalty to God? Is there any commitment that runs deeper than your commitment to God? If there is, then you probably are one of those people asking the question as to when the temple stones will roll down because you do not necessarily see yourself as God's beautiful temple. But if there's none-if nothing stands between you and your commitment to God, then no past nor present political turmoil, no wars or natural calamity should be of any consequence in your attempt to do what is right. In fact, as Paul reminds us do not grow weary in upholding the values of that commitment you have with God. For the glory of God depends on it, and that glory is made possible only by doing what is right.

The temple, like you and I, is beautiful as is. It is a place of honor for sure, but that alone doesn't bring forth the glory of God. Jesus in the gospel story noted some of the challenges we would encounter in any effort to bring life to the glory that sits in each of us. But each effort will come at a greater cost. Some of the cost will be persecutions and arrests, harassment and betrayal from loved ones and trusted friends, and even death. To be a follower of Christ in the first century was to risk it all to real persecution. The Acts of the Apostles and the epistles are littered with many stories about the persecutions, arrests, beatings and death of the first Christians.

Thank God we are far removed from that era, but still, there's some cost to us: we are constantly being encouraged to maintain a life of deep devotion to God against a laissez-faire approach to life. We are constantly being reminded to focus on that one path that leads to eternal life. We are constantly being encouraged to give up the cares of the world. We are constantly being invited to give more of our treasure, share our talent and offer our time for the sake of other people.

In plain language, for the glory of God to be made manifest, it is simply not enough for the temple to be beautifully adorned with precious stones, we need to have a skin in the game, we need to move away from the idea of the temple simply being a building and embrace our new reality of a living temple whose primal task is to bring to life the glory of the living God.

I am reminded of a story I heard a few weeks ago about a pastor of a church who unbeknownst to him had hired a registered sex offender as a praise band leader. Part of this leader's responsibilities was to work with kids, and over the years had worked hard enough to build a solid relationship with the kids and was running a successful program. It so happened that by some miracle of sorts it became known that this individual is a registered offender. He committed the act many years ago, and as Christians we believe in redemption and second chances. But this is the hard part, we see the change in the person, and we can vouch for it. Although the law doesn't prevent a church from hiring such persons, there's a huge exposure for a lawsuit should the church turn a blind eye on this new information. So, what is a church supposed to do?

Indeed, following the way of the kingdom isn't honky-dory all the time. There are times when we experience hardship-in fact, intense hardship. There are times when the healing and restoration that we pray for and expect for ourselves and our loved ones doesn't materialize. There are times when our life doesn't meet the kind of expectations we have set for ourselves and others. There are times when the deliverance that we had hoped for takes a different form. There are times when bad things come our way-and sometimes it isn't in spite of being a Christian, but because we are Christian. And so reluctantly, the church had to let go of this incredible but tainted leader. But not without some division and conflict. Indeed, that is also part of the cost we to pay as followers of Christ. But the point of any conflict and division isn't the conflict or division themselves, rather, it's the endurance it takes to go through and overcome them, just so the glory of God may be made manifest.

The prophet Isaiah inspires hope among the exile community that God will make all things new. Their suffering in exile will come to an end. Carl Jung-the noted Swiss psychiatrist once wrote that "I am not what has happened to me, I am what I choose to become." See, God never puts things back the way they used to be. God never restores the old. Instead, God creates the new. We are prone to wanting the old back. But we can't go back because we are not what has happened to us. We can only go forward because we are what we choose to become. Our call, our vocation is to be part of what God is creating.

Surely it is God who saves me, says the prophet, and the new reality God is creating through His salvation is one where we sit not idle, because Satan finds mischief for the idle hands. Rather, as difficult as it may be, we always have to engage ourselves in the work of what is right, for that is the only way the glory of God is made manifest. Go ahead, and with endurance to always do what is right. Amen.