

The Reverend Carlyle Gill

Sermon

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 18, 2018

Now there is a backstory to this gospel text we have before us this morning. There always is a backstory. But the one today is about Lazarus. You remember Lazarus and his two sisters Martha and Mary. They were all friends of Jesus. When Lazarus died, his sisters ran to Jesus and said, "Do something! Fix this!" Jesus, who cared greatly for Lazarus, ran to his tomb and said, "Lazarus, come out!" His sisters were worried since he had been dead three days. But out came Lazarus. Alive but still bound in burial clothes. Then Jesus said to those gathered, "Unbind him and let him go." So Lazarus was unbound and alive and well. And what did he do right after he got out of that tomb? He held a dinner party! Well, who wouldn't want to celebrate such an event!

This backstory tells us why Jesus' fame began to spread very widely – for good and for ill. And it explains why these Greeks in our text this morning want to meet Jesus. They tell Phillip to tell the other guys who will tell Jesus, "We wish to see Jesus." We want to meet this man. Who wouldn't?

I want to meet Jesus. Actually if I had been in that group of Greeks, I'd have come with my yellow pad and a few questions to get the conversation going. So, if I weren't scared out of my wits, I might begin by saying, "So, Jesus, is it really true...I mean really true...are you God incarnate like the writer of this gospel says and like the church says as it firmed up the Creed." I mean, I believe that's so but I just want to make sure. After all I've been ordained an Episcopal priest for over forty years and I have staked my life on it and I hope, really hope it's true." Then I might attempt to go down my yellow pad with a few more questions.

But the Greeks and I don't get much of a chance to ask much more because Jesus immediately says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Dies? Dies? Dies? The Greeks and I are mystified. We didn't ask about death.

So maybe Jesus doesn't mean actual physical death. Maybe it's a metaphor...maybe a metaphor for self. But the more I think about that, the worse it sounds. You want me to die to my self? Well, if that's true, I want to say to Jesus, "I've been working on this self all my life. It's taken a lot of work. A lot of energy. A lot of therapy. This self has been a project. And you, even if it's a metaphor, want me to die to it?"

Jesus keeps right on going. Yes, Jesus says, if you want to follow me, if you want to be with me, if you want to participate in my work.... Well let him say it just like in this morning's text: **"Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."**

Those are very strong words. And I'm not a hundred percent sure I know what they mean but I have a guess and I think those Greek guys did to. I believe Jesus is pointing to death by self-emptying – like in the Epistle for Palm Sunday we will hear next week..."who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a servant..." In Greek this self emptying is called "kenosis." The Greeks would hear that but would they get it? Do we? Do I?

Self-emptying, letting go. It is a death. A death, as contemplatives Father Thomas Keating and Father Thomas Merton would say, to the **false self**. And Keating would say that that death is harder to undergo than our physical deaths.

False self? What is that exactly?

Think about the person you want the world to see. Is she smart and accomplished? Is he attractive and entertaining, competent at all costs?

Or, think for a minute of all the things that you hang onto. Those things that we think we're absolutely right about. Those losses – especially emotional ones – that we are still hanging on to and trying to fix. Everything that keeps us from being present to the present moment: that which keeps us from being in more honest relationship with ourselves, with others, and with God.

Every once in a while I am able by the grace of God to let that little grain of wheat called my false self, able by the grace of God to see it for what it is and to let it go. What a relief. It is almost as if a lightness of being begins to creep inside and take up residence where all pretense (or most of it) has fallen away.

This is the Fifth and Last Sunday in the season of Lent. Next week we begin the journey to the Cross. The Cross is the ultimate symbol, the ultimate reality, the testing and proving ground of God's willingness in Jesus to empty, to let go, to show us the way into the truth about life. Real life. It is counter cultural. It is counter to everything we have been raised to be, to want, to achieve. But it is the Way of the Cross.

So as we begin to enter into Holy Week, ponder with me your false self – the one you've worked (as I have) so hard to create and what it might take to let it go. To die

to it. To empty. This is what it means to **follow** Jesus, to follow the Cross. This emptying is like cleaning out an old closet where you've stored junk for years. Once it's emptied there is room. This closet called our self is then lighter, roomier, and available for sheer grace.

This letting go, this letting go of the false self plants the seed, the practice, the grace to face our own physical deaths

But for now, I'm going to leave you with some wisdom for Holy Week (really for all of life) from a Buddhist monk and a Christian contemplative. First the monk:

“Do everything with a mind that lets go. Don't accept praise or gain or anything else. If you let go a little you will have a little peace; if you let go a lot you will have a lot of peace; if you let go completely you will have complete peace.”

And now the Christian contemplative, Cynthia Bourgeault, writing about the Centering Prayer practice of “kenosis,” of letting go:

“How beautifully simple – the path of Jesus hidden right there in plain sight...The gospels themselves make clear that he is specifically inviting us to this journey and modeling how to do it. Once you see this, it's the touchstone throughout all his teaching: Let go! Don't cling! Don't hoard! Don't assert your importance! Don't fret! Do not be afraid.”

May the Greeks and you and I who want to meet Jesus know this Way and be given the grace to follow.

AMEN.