

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Trinity Sunday
John 3:15
May 31st, 2015

A pastor friend of mine told me that there are two words he no longer uses. The first word is “starving”. He made the point that he never says he is starving because that is just not true. There are millions of people in the world who are actually “starving” and none of us belong to that category. So, it’s more appropriate to say “I’m really hungry” than to say, “I’m starving.”

The second word he mentioned he will not use is the word, “excruciating” when describing pain. The reason: in the Roman world, back in the day of Jesus, the word “excruciating” in terms of pain was only used for the kind of pain experienced at crucifixion. There was only one kind of “excruciating” pain and that is when a man is “lifted up” and nailed to a tree, bleeding, suffocating, and dying. That’s excruciating.

Now I mention this “lifting up” to experience “excruciating” pain because John mentions Jesus being lifted up. John says that Moses lifted up a snake. He did, as we heard in the Old Testament reading for today. And one might think that the reference to Jesus being “lifted up” means that we praise Him, give Him glory, and all the nice, touchy, feely accolades we give to God because, well, He deserves it. No, rather, it’s so much more than that. The lifting up John wants us to know is the lifting up of Jesus on the cross – to do what He did – to experience the excruciating pain of death that can only be described by such a painful sounding word so that we may experience a blessed “lifting up” that can’t even be imagined as we sit here in the Lord’s house right here and now.

In the Gospel text for today Jesus takes that old story – a story that all of Israel would know by heart – and shows how it will be fulfilled through the work of the Savior. Jesus says, *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

Now, going back to the part in the text that mentions “being lifted up” I want you to know that Jesus uses this word, “hupsoun” in two different ways. We have already alluded to them. It is used of His being lifted up upon the cross. And it is used of His being lifted up into glory at the time of His Ascension into heaven. You see, there was a “double lifting up” in the life of Jesus. He was lifted up on the cross where he experienced that excruciating pain and He was lifted up in glory. One took him to death – the other took him to heaven. Both were for a purpose. Both were to show us what we endure in faith. Both show us that believing in Jesus really has a two-fold reality in our lives – death and glory.

Have you ever thought of it that way – that faith in Jesus takes us to death? It “lifts us up to the cross” like Jesus was lifted up. And as we gaze at our Savior through the eyes of faith, we have been healed and made whole again. In order for there to be life there must first be death – namely the death of ourselves. We put to death our sinful ways. We put to death the old Adam within us by repentance and contrition. Christ’s death leads to Christ’s life. Our life in Christ leads to death which leads to life with Christ. Admittedly this is a bit convoluted. But that’s life. It’s the Christian paradox we have talked about many times before.

Tell me when your life has not been convoluted. Life to death to life – that seems to be the pattern doesn’t it. I’m convinced that our faith puts us in the position of dying and rising back to life each and every day. On a personal level, we die in our faith all the time. Yes, it’s

true, in faith we put to death all evil desires and sinful lust and we rise to life in Christ. That's faith and that happens in our baptisms each day. As Christians we live for the lifting up of Christ – we rely on that lifting up because of our sins. The lifting up on the cross is the most important for you and me – but that is not the one we often live for.

Too many times, in our lives that aren't focused on the cross – but rather on things that involve our own lifting up, we desire to experience the other lifting up in glory. Sometimes, instead of Calvary's Holy Mountain, we focus on that mount of the Ascension, but not gazing up at Jesus, rather, climbing to the highest heights ourselves. We put Jesus' lifting up aside so that we can do what God's people did in the Old Testament text last week did, build a tower to the highest heights to make a name for ourselves. Sinners like you and me like to glory in ourselves. We want others to lift us up – to give us worship – to praise us. From this we get the feeling of satisfaction and so we long for it all the more. We long for it more than longing for how our Lord desires to give you the very result of why He was lifted up on Calvary and then lifted up before the disciples on the Ascension. For us, our lifting up becomes more important than God's.

On this Trinity Sunday, we lift up the name of our Lord – not our own name. We call God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We don't have three Gods. We have one God with three persons in one God. It's hard to comprehend how that works, but so it is with many things when it comes to our Lord. It's strange how out of tragedy the Lord can strengthen faith. Yet, we have witnessed this very thing time and time again. The earthquakes in Nepal have devastated thousands upon thousands. Yet, refugees who have settled in St. Louis, would leave their false gods – many of them Hindu before they came to the United States – and were baptized into the Christian faith. 21 Nepali refugees were baptized on that second “lifted up” day – Ascension Day at Ascension Lutheran Church in St. Louis.

The pain of loss and suffering for those who have lost everything in two very strong earthquakes must be devastating – I'm not going to say excruciating. But there is one – the one Lord – three persons in one God – who knows excruciating. And He knows it for each and every one of those sons and daughters from Nepal.

What is the earthquake for you right now? We might think that whatever we are going through right now does not compare to what those people have experienced, but we have our devastating troubles. Relationships, jobs, fear generated from the unknown future that is ahead of us, troubles with health, troubles with finances... you name it. The pain is quite... a lot. In the midst of all the pain, the fear, the anxiety, we are not left alone. Our eyes are lifted up to the one who knows a greater pain. An excruciating pain.

That pain was more than we will ever know – and it is a pain that knows all other pains. It's a pain that would mean anything but pain for each and every one of us. It's a pain that would have a purpose – not just for the cross but also for that second lifting up on the day of ascension. And now, as we in the New Testament church can see both of those “lifted ups” with eyes wide open – we know that it all means we are lifted up in God's grace to heaven by grace through faith. What a blessing God's excruciating experience is for us.

So while there might be words we will never use, let's also find words we will always use... Jesus lifted up for you. Jesus death for your life. Jesus loves you this I know, for the Bible tells me so. In a world where Jesus is less and less important, we will lift His name on high. He was lifted up for us, so that we live. May God richly bless your Trinity Sunday celebration. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.