
Crucified Love

An Evensong homily by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Lent 3 – Year B

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

A story is told about a girl at her desk in kindergarten. She's very focused on the picture she's drawing. Her teacher walks by and asks,

"What are you drawing?"

The girl replies, "I'm drawing God."

The teacher pauses and declares, "But no one knows what God looks like."

The girl doesn't miss a beat when she answers, "They will in a minute."

That's right! "They will in a minute," the school girl proclaims. Well, something like that kind of bravado is what we see in today's gospel. The word bravado means 'bragging rights'—confidence and pride in one's attitude or behavior. And that's what the girl displays in that joke. But it's also what Jesus displays in our gospel.

Jesus has just thrown the moneychangers out of the temple in Jerusalem. The scripture says,

He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

In reaction, people challenge him to justify his behavior; to prove he has the right or authority to do such things. And that's when he asserts his 'bragging rights' with this bold declaration: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise up" (John 2:19).

Now the "three days" that he refers to are the days following his crucifixion, "after he was raised from the dead" the scripture says. And the temple that is to be raised—the temple that Jesus refers to as his sign, is "the temple of his body;" destined to be destroyed and then restored (John 2:22, 20).

Now here, church friends, we come to the focus of our other New Testament scripture appointed for this third Sunday in Lent: what St. Paul in writing to the Corinthians calls, "the message about the cross."

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18)

From there the apostle goes on to contrast the foolishness of Jesus' crucifixion on the one hand, with the wisdom of God in ordaining that crucifixion. Similarly he contrasts the weakness of Jesus in having his body be so abused and violated on the one hand, with the power of God to transform that abuse into redemption and salvation for us.

Now that leads to our challenge as believers for this third Sunday in Lent: how to embrace what Jesus himself embraced in his life and death: the wisdom of God in the foolishness of the cross, and the power of God in the weakness of crucified love.

Consider the following illustration. The story is told about my recently deceased friend, the social activist Rich Rusk, a son of Dean Rusk who was Secretary of State (1961-69) under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson during the Vietnam War. As a young man Rich Rusk served in the military and one day was being transported by bus with fellow soldiers on assignment. But the bus was so full that there was one soldier who could not be seated. Mile after mile he was standing at the rear of the bus. After half-hour or so of transport, knowing that they were going on for many more miles, Rich Rusk stood up and gave his seat to his fellow soldier at the back of the bus.

Now it is told that he was thinking to himself that if other soldiers on the bus would follow his example, and stand up for a half-hour or so in turn, one after another, then no one would need to stand up for the entire trip. And so, as an act of self-giving care, and for love of justice, and love of his fellow man, Rich stood there in place of his fellow soldier, waiting for another soldier to take his place, voluntarily.

And no one did. And no one did. He stood up for the entire trip. Instead of the soldier he had replaced, it fell on him to stand up for the entire trip. The very thing he was hoping to avoid, and did in fact avoid on behalf of another, he took on himself and incurred himself.

Now many years later, the story continues, Rich's own son Andy Rusk was attending a book signing by one of the soldiers who had been on that bus many years before. And when the son identified himself as the son of Rich Rusk, the author recognized the name and said, "Oh, you're the son of that soldier who stood up on my bus for the whole trip. You're the son of *that* guy!"

Now Christian friends, here's a story of foolishness, of folly, of self-giving love that looks like foolishness; that *is* foolishness from a human perspective. But from the divine perspective it is exactly the wisdom that God enjoins on us. If all of us, an entire planet of human beings, or even just entire families, neighborhoods, communities and groups, churches, organizations and institutions deferred to one another, put themselves in the place of one another, taking on themselves another's burden so that no single one of us was carrying our burdens alone, then no one would be carrying unbearable burdens. All of us would be sharing the suffering of each other in a way that would redeem that suffering, and set the captives free.

That's the mystery of the cross, the power of God that the apostle enjoins on us as the message of the cross on this third Sunday of Lent. And what better way to end our reflection than to leave with this Lenten question: Will I let my body be that temple of God for the works of love waiting to be done in the world today?

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.