
What Jesus Draws Out of Us This Lenten Year

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Lent 5 – Year B

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

One of my spiritual mentors used to like to tease me for being a college student. I met him back in the early seventies. He himself had become a born-again Christian the year I was born in 1951. It gives you an idea of how old I am. He would make witty remarks about various kinds of things. For example, when someone would be described in his company as a 'self-made man' he would humorously remark something like, "Now there goes the result of unskilled labor." Things like that would come out of his mouth.

When I recall that kind of put-down I'm reminded of a New Yorker cartoon that I saw back-in-the-day. It features a plumber in a boiler room with lots of tubes, and pipes, and ducts with fixtures tied around them, bandages, cloths, duct tape and so on. But they were all leaking. Water was leaking and gushing out everywhere! And the caption read, disclosing the plumber's thoughts as he departed the room with a determined look on his face, "Now I will go be a plumber of men's souls."

Well, this script, this scenario of unskilled labor of, and of plumbing people's souls when you can hardly fix a leak, connects with our Collect appointed for this Fifth Sunday in Lent. It's our collective opening prayer that describes what it's like for us, especially in our Lenten perspective, to be not quite skilled enough, not quite effective enough, to pull off managing affairs and circumstances. As the Collect reads, "Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners."

We're not very good at being plumbers of each other's souls—are we, nor even with our own lives—being skilled laborers. In so many ways we cry out, especially in this Lenten season for rescue, for resource, for a Higher Power. In addition the Collect we had a few Sundays ago, on the Third Sunday of Lent, strikes this same theme: "Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves." This powerlessness is a Lenten theme.

Indeed, we have been going through a year of facing into our own powerlessness as a people. We have even become a kind of 'byword among the nations,' to use that biblical phrase, in terms of our susceptibility to failure, to mismanagement. In spite of our technical know-how, in spite of our can-do pride as a nation, as a people, we've been humbled by this failure to rescue our fellow citizens, each other, from the pandemic scourge that's upon us.

Repentance, and confession, might yield to something even more connecting among us, a kind of generosity, a kind of grace; forbearance with one another, knowing that we are collectively in this Lenten mode of inability, of powerlessness, of lack of effective skill. Even this recent legislative action by our Congress to provide pandemic legislation to rescue us; yes, it's effective that we were able to accomplish something of major significance. At the same time, it reminds us of how dependent we are, how we are all caught in this web of neediness, of ineffectiveness, of dire need; the need to be rescued.

I'm reminded here of that expression by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he remarked that, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." That's not just our national experience, but it's a global experience. It's something that we could always have affirmed globally, but now is materially, physically, abundantly evident.

It's the sense of pathos there that I hear in our scriptures appointed for today, especially in the reading from the

epistle. In the Epistle to the Hebrews we hear that:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard . . . [as] he learned obedience through what he suffered . . . (Hebrews 5:7-8)

There's a kind of pathos here that our Savior shares with us, and shares it with us in his great travail, as he walked his Lenten path; his journey to being lifted up, as the gospel reading says, "If I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." But what else did he say? Notice the other remark in that gospel reading. When the crowd around him heard a voice, a thundering voice, our Lord interpreted it as a voice from heaven, and said, "Now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be driven out." (John 12:30-31)

I think in this season of pandemic, in this Lenten season as we approach the Easter resurrection celebration, we can also look at our unruly wills and see their connection to the ruler of this world who needs to be driven out. We can see way in which we are implicated, complicit, connected to the ruler of this world, as a ruler of chaos, as the ruler of dissension and conflict, of pitting people against one another so that good things cannot be accomplished.

How are our unruly wills and affections tied in with the ruler of this world, so that in his being driven out, we too can be released from that captivity, released to belong to one another in a web of mutuality, of generosity, grace and hospitality toward one another? That's our Lenten journey. What is it that we need to renounce? What affections do we need to replace and redirect so that we might be resurrection people saved and rescued for new life and new creation?

And what will this new creation look like? I propose that it will be a new generosity among us so that, as we have become increasingly aware of the ways in which we are challenged with our unruly wills and affections to belong to one another in a web of mutuality, we will begin to grant each other, grace, forbearance, slack, and a willingness to yield to one another, to make space for one another, to be finding our own path—yes; but also to be finding ways different from our own to belong, to connect, to find ways to new life and restoration. I propose that we will be able to grant one another that kind of generosity, that kind of forbearance, that kind of leniency.

That's what new life could look like on the other side of our challenges in this Lenten year, this pandemic year. I invite us to walk that path, to explore that possibility, as we complete our Lenten journey, 'that our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found amid the swift and varied changes of the world' (Collect for 5 Lent, Book of Common Prayer).

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.