

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

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I used to think of Lent as a time to be somber and dour. Perhaps it was my Catholic upbringing that instilled in me the deeply ingrained sense that this was a season to be mournful and remember the wrath our sins have wrought. While I used to think that was a uniquely Catholic sort of thing, I soon discovered in my early days of Anglicanism that we have our own unique sense of remorse for what we have done. Consider, for a moment, the confession for the Daily Office from the *Book of Common Prayer*. After naming the multitude of ways in which we've failed to love God and neighbour, the prayer concludes the litany of our faults with the lines: "And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders." The words are striking and remind us of the significant influence of the Reformed theologians Jean Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli upon our theology and worship. According to them, we humans are so utterly wounded by sin that there is nothing we can do but hope in the cross of Christ for our redemption. We are, as they thought, a miserable lot of people.

While not to entirely dismiss Calvin and Zwingli and all those who emphasize the extraordinary wounds sin has inflicted upon humanity and creation, I've come to experience Lent and all penitential acts not as reminders of our sinfulness, but an invitation to remember we are not at the centre of the world and that we are called to be gift to others. Penitential seasons and acts invite us to be mindful of our fundamental vocation, as articulated in the creation stories of Genesis, to be caretakers of God's creation. We were created to be stewards of God's creation, to give of ourselves out of love for others, and to open our hearts to God's love. Yet with sin, the focus turns from the other to the self. We become inordinately focused on our own wants and desires and forget the needs of others, including creation itself.

If there is any doubt about this, consider the extraordinary destruction we've wrought upon creation by our desire to amass greater material goods and wealth. In our search to satisfy our longings, we've forgotten to care for God's creation and to enjoy its fruits wisely and prudently.

Or consider how the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the many ways we've forgotten our elders and how public policies have failed to ensure adequate housing, healthcare, and food for those in need. While indeed there were many who've worked to ensure proper long-term care homes for the aged and housing for homeless, our leaders — often with our consent — sought to allow a free-market to go widely unregulated and all for the sake of profit. We've simply allowed our elders to be left at for-profit care homes that did little to ensure their well-being and have allowed our housing markets to go wildly out of control, to the point that now many can't even afford an apartment, let alone a home. All because we have an insatiable desire for wealth and personal gain.

And let us not forget the many ways we've blinded ourselves to the rampant racism that prevails in our society. Sure, we may look to our neighbours to our south and shake our heads and question their treatment of persons of colour, but we forget that only an hours drive from here is a large community of Indigenous persons who have no access to clean drinking water. If that's not alarming enough for us, let us not forget that government laws and practices continue to prohibit the same people from even owning the land upon which their homes stand. And this is only one form of racial injustice. Once again, the pandemic has revealed racial inequalities in other communities. None of this is new, it has always been with us; we simply did not open our eyes to see or our ears to hear the cry of the disenfranchised or the marginalized.

I share these things not to stir feelings of guilt or shame in us, but to challenge us to real ask ourselves one question: do we truly take up our cross and follow Jesus as his disciples?

The way of the cross, the way of Christ, was a life of self-giving. When we look at Jesus' ministry throughout all the gospels it is evidently clear that Jesus embodied the mercy, the compassion, and love of God for those whom the world forgot. Jesus' ministry was about giving life to not only the poor and sick, but to those enslaved by their own wants and desires. Life, Jesus proclaimed, is lived when we give of ourselves for others. St. John in his gospel says as much. "No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13)

Jesus' invitation to take up ones cross in today's gospel lesson is not about us giving things up for Lent or embracing penitential acts, but rather a call to us to give of ourselves as gift for others. To die to our own wants and desires so that all may have life and have it to the full. To take on the cross, to let the cross shape and form our lives, is to reverse the sin of Adam. To turn selfish desire into selfless living. To take on the cross is to take on Christ and to let his way of life be our way of life.

I couldn't think of a better reading than today's gospel for this vestry Sunday, a time when we reflect and consider how we've embraced the cross and given ourselves as gift to others.

Several months ago I invited us to be a church of prayer and a church of mercy. I desired for us to be a church that gives of itself to God in prayer and allows God to shape and form us so that we might be blessing to others. As I've said so many times before, the Church exists not for itself, but for the life of the world.

When we are a church of prayer and a church of mercy, we embrace the cross and we live its life-giving way in the world. We let go of our wants and needs and ask the Living Lord what is it that God wants to do so that others may have life and have it to the full.

As I read our vestry reports and reflect on the past year, I am moved by the many ways we've been a church of prayer and a church of mercy. We have embraced the cross and carried it throughout these many long months of pandemic. I've seen your love and compassion for others in the very early days of the pandemic when many of you took upon yourself to call those who are isolated and alone and to deliver meals, groceries, and supplies to those unable to leave their homes. I saw us being a church of prayer and a church of mercy in the fervour of your prayer. Although for much of this time we've been unable to gather in person for worship, many of you have done all you can to not only participate in our prayer and worship, you've printed sermons and worship leaflets and left them on the doorsteps of those unable to participate in our livestream worship. And I've felt the intensity of your prayer as I've seen you sit in the solitude of this church and submit your prayer request for those suffering from various ailments.

I've seen you be a church of prayer and a church of mercy in your participation of our community garden. Never in my wildest of dreams would I have imagined us planting a garden to provide nutritious and colourful produce to those unable to afford these riches of the earth. Your ministry was born of prayer, sustained by prayer, and it was done in love for others.

Finally, I've watched you live as a church of prayer and a church of mercy as so many of you gave of yourselves through the sharing of your time, talent, and treasure. I'll be very honest with you, I was afraid the pandemic would hurt our church. Yet I've been overwhelmed by your generosity and I delight in your

participation in the ministry of this parish. Just look at how so many of you helped surpass our Coldest Night of the Year Walk fundraising goal: our simple walk has further ensured others can live life to the full. God has done great things here because of you and I know God has much in store for us in the years to come.

My friends, there is so much more we can do to be a church of prayer and a church of mercy. As we examine the year past and look to the year ahead, I ask you to consider this: how will you take up your cross and follow Jesus and be gift to the world? There is much need in our community, our country, and our world. While we may feel wearied by the seemingly never-ending lockdown and dreadful news of the pandemic, now is the time for us to be church that gives of itself as gift to others.

My prayer and hope for our parish community is that we will continue to grow as a people of prayer. By prayer we give of ourselves to God and allow God, the great potter, to form and shape us into his instruments of grace and peace in the world. Renew your commitment to participating in our weekly celebration of Eucharist and consider joining us in our daily prayer of the Psalms and the words of holy scripture. Let yourselves be fed by the Word so that you may become the Word broken for others.

Moreover, I challenge you to consider how you will share in our ministry as a church of mercy this year. Will you join us in our community garden ministry and help us care and tend for the fruits of the earth so that they may provide an abundant harvest for others? Will you be a eucharistic people who, fed by Word and Sacrament, go out and set a table of plenty so all can eat and share in God's table of plenty?

Finally, I invite you to help us explore new ways for confronting racism and to ensure all our included in God's kingdom. While I personally know how painful it is to recognize the ways we may unknowingly hold certain beliefs and perceptions of others, I know too we can open our eyes and ears to see and hear the experience of those who are marginalized because of the colour of their skin or the ethnic community from which they come. Let us be a church of mercy that transforms our hearts and minds so that everyone may find a place at the table.

Will you take up the cross, follow Jesus, and be gift to others so that all may have life and have it to the full? Then come and follow Jesus and share in our ministry as a church of prayer and a church of mercy. Amen.