

Those Who Weep Will Laugh

Homily by Michael Fitzpatrick

In our epistle reading, St. Paul tells us that “if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our faith is in vain, and we are still in our sins.” He ends our selection by saying, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.”

Paul is making a connection between Christ’s resurrection and our hope in God that may not be obvious to some of us. Why if Christ has not been raised would our faith be hopelessly placed?

We cannot duck the question. Paul warns us in this passage that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, those of us who gather every Sunday to “proclaim his resurrection and his coming in glory,” as we will say together later this morning during the consecration prayer – we are guilty of misrepresenting God. If we’re going to proclaim to everyone who enters this beautiful house of worship that this God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, we’d better be telling the truth and not selling false hope.

So, why does it matter so much to Paul that God raised Jesus from the dead?

I’ve been having a lovely conversation lately with a former Stanford colleague of mine who has been asking some fabulous questions. She’s quite theologically literate and curious, and she pulls no punches with her sharp inquiries. Recently, she put this question to me. Here’s what she wrote,

“I think Christians should focus more on the law of love and on God’s love than the resurrection. Why can’t we just adhere to the Sermon on the Mount and law of love, without the complex and ancient language of homoousios [homo-oo-see-os], and the contested history of ecumenical counsels, christological heresies,

and so on?”

Friends, if you don't know this about me by now, this is the kind of question that gets me out of bed in the morning. I love this stuff! First, she says why can't we just focus on the Sermon on the Mount and dispense with all the extra theological trappings. The Sermon on the Mount refers to Matthew's version of Jesus' teaching where, among other things, we're given the beatitudes. In today's Gospel reading we have Luke's version of the teaching, the Sermon on the Plain. So this is a good time to face the brunt of her question.

Second, she says why can't we just focus on the law of love (“love the Lord your God with all you are and your neighbor as yourself”) and not worry about stuff like the homoousios [homo-oo-see-os]. Yes, I partially used her quote today just to have an excuse to say homoousios [homo-oo-see-os] a few times in the pulpit. That's an older but important Greek word that we echo every Sunday in the Nicene Creed when we say that Jesus is “of one Being with the Father.” ‘One Being’ is the homoousios [homo-oo-see-os]. Now ya'll have a 50 cent word to use at trivia night.

But her point is why can't we just say that God loves us and we're supposed to love God and not worry about all this other stuff like the Incarnation and, as she said at the beginning, the death and resurrection of Jesus? Can't we just set all of that aside and focus on God's love?

It's a fair question, and one I think a lot of earnest folk have asked themselves. I'm grateful to her for asking it.

To paraphrase what Paul is telling us this morning, we cannot have God's love without the crucifixion, the resurrection, the incarnation, the homoousios [homo-oo-see-os], and all the rest of it. The law of love is not like a John Lennon song. It's not a feeling or a sentiment or an act of the will – just love everyone, just do it. When we look around us, and when we look honestly at ourselves, knowing that God loves us and that

we are supposed to love God and our neighbor doesn't seem to be enough. We still struggle to live as if it's true. And that is why Paul insists that the resurrection matters.

In the classic 1995 Michael Mann film *Heat*, there's this wonderful scene where the master thief, played by Robert De Niro, is about to make his final getaway from the LAPD. He's in his car with his girlfriend (played by the delightful Amy Brenneman) on the freeway to LAX where a private jet awaits. All he has to do is get on it and he's out, scot free.

But then he gets a phone call letting him know that a man he wants revenge against is holed up at a hotel near the airport. The film dramatically shows him approaching the exit to the hotel, with one road sign pointing to the airport and the other road sign pointing to the off-ramp where the object of his vengeance is hiding. All he has to do is stay the course, set aside his feelings of anger, and he will have the life, the future, and the woman of his dreams.

At the last second, he jerks the steering wheel and careens onto the off-ramp. Like the Greek tragedies, this decision leads to his downfall.

Whenever I watch this film with others, they always yell at the tv screen, "What are you doing? You should have just kept going! Forget that guy, he's not worth it!" In other words, he should have chosen differently. He should have put the future of his beloved over his need for revenge. Why didn't he? This is where the "deceptive heart" from our reading in Jeremiah comes to the fore. We can all think of moments in our own lives where we've thought to ourselves, *I should have chosen differently*. I'm not talking about small stuff, like "I should have gotten tea rather than coffee." I'm referring to those decisions which define the trajectory of our lives.

The reason that Robert De Niro's master thief doesn't choose differently

is because in some sense he can't. A person who doesn't take revenge when the opportunity presents itself is not him. He is the kind of person who settles all scores, who leaves no loose threads, no unfinished business. So when we're yelling at the tv, "No, don't do it!", we're asking him to be someone he isn't. He needs a **conversion** first, to change from being one kind of person to another.

And Paul thinks that's what God's love is all about. It's well and good to say we should all love God and each other. But we don't. And if we're honest, it's because we're not the kinds of people who just effortlessly love God and others. We need to *become* those kinds of people.

We need to die to the kind of person we were before God's love came into our lives, and resurrect as the kind of person who has been baptized by God's love. That's why we need resurrection. We need to die and rise with Christ. Because if Christ has not been raised, then we are still in our sins – we're still people who should have done otherwise than we did.

Paul is actually talking about resurrection in two senses. The first sense is the one I just described, where we die and rise with Christ by participating spiritually in his death and resurrection. But there is a second sense as well, which is that we also need our bodies to die and rise with Christ's resurrected body. We're all going to die. That's the given. The good news is that our bodies will be raised to new life; that death is not the last word.

Which leads us to the beatitudes here in Luke's gospel. Luke records Jesus as teaching the crowd gathered on the Plain, saying, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." My friend wants to know why we can't just follow the beatitudes and not worry about resurrection. Well, here's why we can't. How will the poor receive the kingdom of God if they're dead? Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." Wonderful, but what about those who've died of starvation?

Only if there is a reckoning, where God's love is reflected in God's justice, can these words be true. At the resurrection, not only will God give new life to our bodies, but the relations between us will be rectified. Paired with the blessings we also have woes. Jesus warns, "Woe to you who are rich, for there will be no one to console you. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." Jesus is painting a picture of the Last Things, of God's ultimate justice, when God sets the world to rights. Those who have will find all they had given to those who have-not.

Jesus does not die and rise again because God needed something before God could love us. God doesn't need anything. That's what leaves God free to love without an ulterior motive, to love without requiring reciprocity, to love without a quid pro quo. Only the God who needs nothing is free to give everything and love everyone.

No, Jesus dies and rises again because that's what *we* need. We need a death and resurrection in our souls, to become the kinds of people who can love God fully and love our neighbor as ourselves. We need a death and resurrection in our bodies, to live again in a world where God's justice reigns supreme.

There's another pair of blessing and woe that Luke records in Jesus' teaching. First the woe.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

Now the blessing.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

If we want to speak of God's love, we cannot speak in the abstract. We must be concrete in the way that Jesus is teaching us so to do. God loves us so much that at the resurrection everyone will receive justice. Today,

those with plenty at the expense of those who have nothing are at leisure to laugh and be gay. At the resurrection, their laughter will be stifled as they discover that their Creator was on the side of those who could not muster a laugh.

Yet those who suffer through this life, whose spirits are broken by tragedy and loss and misfortune, at the resurrection they will have enough, their bellies will be full, and as they gaze upon the smiling face of Jesus they will laugh and leap with joy.

Without the resurrection, God's love and Jesus' teaching in the beatitudes cease to be acclamations of hope. But if Christ has been raised, as we proclaim here every Sunday, then we are raised with him. Just as God is free to love us wastefully and without need of return, so in resurrection we are set free to love God and neighbor gratuitously and without expectation.

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have died.”

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