

Sermons at Christ Church

Be A Joyful Gift To Others.

Lent V

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“Very truly, I tell you. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus said this to Philip, Andrew and the Greeks who went to see him. Life comes from death.

You cannot have life if you haven’t died to something, if you cannot sacrifice. The grain which dies is the sacrifice that we make. It is only the depth of our sacrifice that determines the kind of results that we want.

Results matter because we have been given a new spirit. But results are possible only when you love yourself so much that you are willing to die in order to save yourself.

Dying to self is the sacrifice that we make. The self is always a stumbling block in our pursuit of a relationship with God and with each other.

The self is our one impediment, and until it dies, we will not experience the productivity that comes with new birth, nor will we see the results that comes with a new spirit. Results are important and the self ought to die in order to have life.

Here’s a story for you, a minister who was standing in line at the pearly gates of heaven. In front of him was a guy dressed in a large t- shirt, blue jeans and sun glasses. Peter came by and asked him, hey who are you? I am Joe Cohen, taxi cab driver, New York City. Peter checked his book and there he was. He handed him a silk robe and a golden staff and said to him, welcome to heaven.

Following him was a minister. He stepped up and said, I am Rev Joseph Snow, I was the dean of St Mary’s Cathedral, Washington, D.C. Peter checked his list and there he was. He handed him a cotton robe and a wooden staff.

He wasn’t amused. Hey, wait a minute, the taxi cab driver got a silk robe and a golden staff. How can this be? How come I have a cotton robe and a wooden staff? Peter said to him, well sir, up here we work by results, up here, results matter. When you preached, people slept but when he drove, people prayed.

In the Old Testament reading, the people of Israel are in exile in Babylon. Their time in exile is akin to their time in slavery in Egypt. When God delivered them from slavery, God established a covenant with them. But they repeatedly violated the covenant.

In fact, their present predicament in exile is a testament to their failure of keeping their part of the bargain. But the prophet isn't all hopeless about the predicament of the people of God, he is hopeful. In spite of all that the people had done, the prophet still believes in God's covenantal mercy.

The mercy is echoed by the psalmist when he pleads "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*"

Like the psalmist, the prophet isn't dismissing the wrong that the people have done, the prophet is counting on the mercy of God. The prophet is saying that forgiveness is central to the promise of God, and God's forgiveness flows out of God's mercy.

The prophet believes that there will be a return back to the land of promise. But they wouldn't return to the old covenant they violated. They will be returning to a new covenant which would be vastly different from the old covenant. The people will not only return to the land of promise, they will also return to the Lord. Their return to the Lord is what will make the difference, their return to the Lord is what will produce results.

I am sure you all have heard about Thomas Edison. When he was a boy, he returned from school one day and gave a paper to his mother. He told his mother, my teacher gave this paper to me and told me to only give it to my mother. His mother's eyes were tearful as she read the letter out to her child. Your son is a genius, the letter said, this school is too small for him and doesn't have enough good teachers for training him. Please teach him yourself. Many years after Edison's mother had died, Edison had become one of the greatest inventors of the century.

One day, he was going through the old closet and found a folded letter which was given to him by his teacher for his mother. He opened it. The message written on the letter was: your son is mentally ill. We cannot allow him to attend our school anymore. He is expelled.

Edison became emotional reading the letter. He later wrote in his diary "Thomas Alva Edison was a mentally ill child whose mother turned him into the genius of the century." What is the genius in you? What is in you that needs new life?

In fact, the hopelessness that the teacher expressed in Thomas wasn't enough for his mother to buy into that same narrative and give up on him. She believed that something good could come out of him and so she sacrificed to tutor her son. She loved her son so much so that she was willing to sacrifice anything for him. She loved her son so much so that she was willing to hate her life for the sake of her son.

Thomas would later write these words about his mother "My mother was the making of me." I am the result of my mother's work. I am the result of my mother's sacrifice. I wonder how the mother felt reading the letter the teacher wrote about her son. I wonder how you would feel reading such letter about your child from their teacher. Imagine reading something like that about yourself? It is incredibly heartbreaking.

The good news is that in spite of what someone may write about you, or how you even see yourself, you cannot give up on yourself because God doesn't give up on you. Our sins may be many, but they are never enough for God to abandon us in exile. God always seeks that new covenant with us. God always seeks restoration with us. God always seeks to mend. God always seeks reconciliation with us. God always brings us back to the land of promise where the only covenant that matters is our return to God.

The point here is when you sacrifice your own life, when you give something up for the sake of the greater good, when you devote time to your own spiritual growth and nourishment, and when you love yourself so much so that you are willing to let a part of you die, you would see life spring forth, you will taste results, your productivity will rise and you will begin to bear fruit-you will become like that single grain of wheat which produces wheat in abundance-because it first died.

Are you willing to die to something? Listen to Jesus, those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life will keep it. If you love your life to the point where nothing disturbs you, nothing stirs you up and if nothing troubles you, you will lose that life.

But if you hate your life because something stirs you up about that life, something disturbs you about that life, then you are more than likely going to save that life because you will dare to sacrifice to save that life.

The cost of our freedom from sin was enormous. The enormity of the cost is realized in the words of Jesus “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

This may have been a sobering moment for Jesus. He knew that his time was near. He was very much aware of the impending betrayal, crucifixion and death.

Those of us who love our lives and hate to sacrifice, may have walked away. But in spite of what Jesus knew was going to happen to him, Jesus didn’t draw himself away from his task because he wasn’t alone. Like a shamrock leaf, he was deeply rooted.

He loved the world so much that he was willing to embrace the sacrifice of his own life to save the world. What are you willing to sacrifice?

Our reality is one where we have been set free, we have been given a new spirit, we have a new covenant with God and we are no longer in exile. But the tragedy is we sometimes choose to live in bondage. And so long as we live in bondage, we cannot be productive. We cannot produce any good results.

Like Thomas Edison, has someone has written a letter about you, announcing to the world that you are not worth their time? That your sins are such that you are beyond repairs? That nothing good can come out of you? I don’t think so. Something good can come out of you, if only you are willing to let the grain of wheat die, if you are willing to sacrifice the self.

Let me end with these ancient words from Rumi, “Yesterday I was clever and so I wanted to change the world. Now that I am wise, I want to change myself.” We can only change through sacrifice.

God’s glory is in bringing everyone back to the land of promise and establishing a new covenant. God is bringing you back, not because of you but because of God’s mercy. My only prayer is that we can embrace this new covenant of mercy with sacrificial and contrite hearts. **Amen.**