

The Reverend Laura Palmer
St. Martin-in-the-Fields
Epiphany 7, Year C
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

It was December 13th, 2019. The church was packed. As the doors opened in the back. A thundering organ and two choirs sang and the congregation began to sing: A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. A helper he, among the flood of mortal ills prevailing. Tears filled my eyes as the procession began. Many of you were here when Barbara Ballenger and I were ordained.

In a hundred days or so the world would go dark in a chokehold of fear by a virus. But that day, surrounded by those we loved best and the culmination of journeys that had taken years was glorious. Few days in my life will ever surpass it.

So as one who laid face down on the hard stone and pledged her life to Jesus, it is deeply unsettling, to say the least, when I feel distanced from him and have to silence the words that often rise up: Easy for you to say. It is never ever easy to confront the smallness and hardness of my own heart and throw open its shutters when my fear wants to close them tight.

Love my enemies? Do good to those who hate me? Pray for those who abuse me? Turn the other cheek? Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

I don't give to everyone who begs from me. Nor in those moments do I remember our patron saint, St. Martin, cutting his cloak in half to cover a shivering beggar, as we see in the exquisite beauty of the Tiffany window above us. It's as if we're given our marching orders as we pass beneath it every Sunday.

It's called, after all, spiritual work. It isn't supposed to be easy. It's supposed to be liberating. But when I really stop and get out of the way of my puny self, I realize I don't need to feel distanced from Jesus' divinity. I need to see in it an invitation to affirm, again and again, how much I need him and the genius of the gospel.

The liberating, life giving love of Jesus is where I find my hope. I know in a way I wish I didn't what happens when we make America hate again and unleash terror and fear in too many hearts and lives.

Why were Bishop Marian Budde's words so startling? Fear and mercy? For those who are afraid? Kindness? Jesus told truth to power. Sometimes bluntly, other times enigmatically or metaphorically, but never was he on the side of cruelty.

It is love and forgiveness that is embedded in each of our readings this morning. In Genesis, Joseph forgives his brothers who tried to kill him. But it's not an abracadabra forgiveness. It does not deny the torture and pain inflicted on him *for years*.

Joseph did not transmit his pain, he transformed it. Father Richard Rhor reminds us that is what we are all called to do. We shouldn't try to get rid of our own pain until we've learned what it has to teach. We must all carry the cross of our own reality until God transforms us through it.

These are the wounded healers of the world, and healers who have fully faced their wounds are the only ones who heal anyone else.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he draws the distinction between our physical and spiritual bodies within us. What Paul suggests is a seed of the image of God. If we nurture and grow that seed within us our spiritual bodies, our souls, in God will be imperishable and raised up when our physical bodies wither away.

But this is all the work of our lifetimes. Jesus is not giving us a checklist, he is giving us a path, a GPS to follow looking through the limited vision of our own egos. We are destined to fail. Forgive, completely turn the other cheek, don't retaliate, forgive as we have been forgiven and do good to those who hate us.

Yes, the impossibility of it all can be a reason to feel distance from Jesus but instead it's a way to draw closer, to recognize him as the light and the love that leads us beyond our own smallness.

My understanding of the crucifixion was transformed in an Italian restaurant in New York City of all places one night when I was talking with a priest, mentor, and friend about Jesus's cry from the cross. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

How could he utter those words in the agony of his tortured dying? He didn't, my wise friend said, he asked *God* to forgive them. And that transformed everything for me because it made a space for something I had not imagined before. I could hold on to this possibility.

We know Jesus was both human and divine and in the moment of his greatest pain and suffering he was authentically human. He asked God to do what he could not do because he knew forgiveness was the only way to break the gruesome cycle of violence and scapegoating that is embedded in human history all the way from Genesis to the Cross.

Yes, we are called to love and love generously. We are called to forgive as the way to transform suffering, but it is slow and hard work. As author Debbie Thomas writes,

“Forgiveness isn't an escalator. It's a spiral staircase we circle and circle and circle again trying to create distance between the pain we've suffered and the new life we seek. Sometimes we cannot tell if we've ascended at all. We keep seeing the same broken landscape below us but ever so slowly our perspective changes. Ever so slowly the ground of our pain falls away. Ever so slowly we rise.”

We rise and the light of the resurrected Christ breaks through unexpectedly, as it did in a supermarket checkout line in Colorado.

Anne Marie Hochhalter died last Sunday at 43. She was paralyzed in the mass shooting at Columbine in 1999 when she was a junior in high school. She said back then she was a shy student and a clarinet player and described herself as a band dork. A paraplegic, she went through dark times after Columbine but she eventually found her faith again and found her voice and became an outspoken advocate for the disabled and the long-term impact of gun violence on individuals.

Her obituary in the New York Times recalled a moment in a supermarket checkout line when the cashier bluntly said to her, “why are you in a wheelchair?”. Just as bluntly she said, “I was shot and paralyzed at Columbine.”

The Man Behind her in the checkout line spoke up. He was part of the SWAT team that wasn't allowed into the school for hours. He told Anne Marie he was so sorry he couldn't get to her sooner. “It's okay”, she said, “no one blames you. I don't blame you”, she said. “It was one of the greatest moments of my life.” Amen.