

Year A, Proper 17
Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Martyrdom: A How-To Guide

Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

You know, *literally* dying for the sake of Christ is not something I spend a lot of time thinking about. But on our trip to England this summer, I found myself thinking about it more than usual. It's hard to go to Canterbury, for example, and make the pilgrimage to the site of Thomas à Becket's murder, and *not* think about losing one's life in following Jesus. But for me, oddly enough, it was in Salisbury that the reality of martyrdom struck closest to home.

After we toured Salisbury Cathedral, we went looking for a marker that I had been told was on a nearby wall. We found a cathedral guide who was able to direct us, and soon we found the plaque on a building near one of the gates to the cathedral grounds. The plaque memorializes three Protestant martyrs who were burned at the stake in 1556. It was part of Queen Mary's attempt to reinstate Roman Catholicism after Henry VIII had broken the English Church away from the pope's control. They were three among hundreds of people – clergy and lay, powerful and simply outspoken – people who were killed because of the way they had been given to understand faith in Jesus Christ. These three martyrs were a farm worker named John Maundrel, a tailor named William Coberly, and a stonemason named John Spicer.

Now, I've had a picture of this marker on the door of my office for the past couple of years, so this connection with John Spicer the martyr wasn't a surprise. What *was* surprising was the intensity of that moment, standing there on the very site where an ancestor of mine had actually been set on fire and burned alive during that awful time.

And it makes me wonder – would I have done the same? Or, given the opportunity to recant and literally save my own skin, would I have simply said what the authorities wanted to hear? My hunch is the latter, despite Jesus' promise in today's Gospel reading that, at the end of time, when he returns in glory, "he will repay everyone for what has been done" (Matthew 16:27).

I imagine that, for most of us, choosing martyrdom seems completely beyond our reach. That's the kind of thing we leave to the true heroes of the faith, the people we often end up celebrating at our Friday noon Eucharists – people like St. Alban, a Roman in Britain who gave himself to be executed in the place of another believer; or Jonathan Myrick Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian who took a bullet for an African American girl in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. "Take up the cross," Jesus says to us. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose

their life for my sake will find it.” This Gospel reading probably seems like an impossible demand from the one we’re called to follow.

But I think we can find some help and some hope in the other two readings we heard today. Not that they undermine the power of this message – not at all. Instead, I think they make it possible for those of us who *aren’t* St. Alban or Jonathan Myrick Daniels to obey Jesus’ call to lose our lives for his sake.

The story from Exodus is one many of us know well, both from Scripture and maybe from a movie or two. Moses is minding his own business when he comes across a situation he can’t understand, a bush that’s on fire but not consumed by the flames. He comes near and looks closer, and the voice of God comes to him, calling him by name. That’s potentially devastating enough, to stand in the presence of God. Everyone at that time knew that a human being who saw God face to face would die. But Moses does not die, of course. Instead, he’s given what many of us might consider a fate *worse* than death – he gets a mission. God tells this shepherd to go and liberate God’s people from a tyrant. God orders this inarticulate nobody to stand before the greatest ruler of his age and speak God’s truth to power. Moses is sure God’s got the wrong guy. He says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11) A little further along in the story, several excuses later, he cuts to the chase and admits that he just doesn’t want the job, saying “O my Lord, please send someone else!” (4:13). But God doesn’t let him off the hook. It is Moses whom God needs for this work, and it is Moses’ calling to love God through his obedience. This is the first clause in God’s most basic law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37). Loving God isn’t about warm and fuzzy feelings; it isn’t even simply being thankful for all God’s blessings. Loving God is about action. It’s about obedience – going where you’re called, even if you’re sure that God’s got the wrong person in mind.

If this story about Moses shows us what it looks like to love God, then the second reading, from Romans, shows us what it looks like to fulfill the second clause in God’s most basic law: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). In this part of his letter, Paul offers a series of instructions about how people of faith should live in this world. And what he has to tell us doesn’t come as a surprise at all because Jesus himself taught many of the same things: Extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. Live in harmony with one another. Associate with the lowly. Don’t claim to be wiser than you are. Don’t repay anyone evil for evil. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. These are not easy teachings at all. Even though we’re reborn by water and the Holy Spirit in baptism, we aren’t wired this way. And the world around us certainly doesn’t encourage us to practice this kind of love. As it is with loving God, so it is with loving our neighbors: God isn’t asking us to have warm and friendly feelings about people. God isn’t even asking us to like everybody. God *is* asking us to take a stand against the brokenness of our natures and against the brokenness of the world. God is calling us to the obedient practice of love.

This is the core of what it means to take up the cross and follow Jesus: love God and love neighbor. That isn’t anything we don’t already know. But what we may not always see is the

power of following that call, certainly for us as individuals but also for the world around us. Moses loved God in the most complete sense, giving all of himself to go where he was being led. I think much of the effectiveness of his leadership came from the fact that he was doing something so radical, so unexpected in the eyes of the people around him. He became a witness of loving God, a witness of being willing to go where he was sent despite his own uncertainty. And the world was changed by his witness. Something similar is true about living as Paul describes, loving our neighbors in ways that take the world by surprise. When we embrace someone very different from us; when we bless those who wish us ill; when we give aid and comfort to people who are supposed to be our enemies – when we “let love be genuine” (Romans 12:9), we stand as witnesses to the world, proclaiming by quiet acts of love that we follow different rules and obey a different Lord. When your words and your actions reveal your love of God and love of neighbor, you claim the power God gives us all to speak louder than we could ever imagine. You become a witness, and your testimony changes the world.

And, of course, that’s what it is to be a martyr. The word *martyr* means “witness” in Greek. It’s not about sacrificing ourselves for the sake of sacrifice. It’s not about earning our way into salvation. Martyrdom is about being a light to the world around us, a light of love for God and love for neighbor, a light of the love of Christ himself. In those moments, when we give ourselves to God and neighbor, we blaze as brightly as that 16th century stonemason in Salisbury whose name I share. *We* become martyrs; *we* become witnesses. And as we take up that cross of love, our lives echo the unexpected, even shocking, *joy* that we hear from the mouths of martyrs across the ages. As my ancestor proclaimed even as he stood tied to the stake that day in Salisbury, so may we proclaim as we give ourselves away: He said, “This is the joyfulest day that ever I saw!”¹

1. Borrett, Constance. “The Salisbury Martyrs.” Website of Emmanuel Reformed Church in Salisbury. Available at: <http://www.salisburyemmanuel.org.uk/index.html?/articles/SalisburyMartyrs.htm>. Accessed Aug. 27, 2008. Spicer’s martyrdom is also attested in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*.