
Lenten Buyer's Club (A Cruciform Conceit)

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith The Third Sunday in Lent – Year B

You know that wisdom saying about “the older I get the smarter my parents get?” I pondered that when I first heard it as a younger man, and realized how true it was becoming even at that time: how true it was that my parents seemed to be getting smarter about life. The things I used to listen to them say, they seemed to be making more sense. Ha!

Well, it reminds me of a commitment we make in my peer counseling community. We call them “frontier commitments” for different identity groups. These commitments are like affirmations: affirmations on the “frontier” of the identity that those identity groups need to grow into. And this is the one for elders; it has four points. Let me see if I can remember them (as an elder—ha).

- I promise not to die.
- I promise never to grow old.
- I promise to get smarter and smarter.
- And I promise to have more fun than ever.

Now notice: those commitment sayings are crafted to contradict, at every point, the pull for that particular identity group to settle into its stereotypical forms of distress, oppression, rigidity, patterned behaviors and attitudes. Notice: ‘I promise or commit never to grow old. To get smarter and smarter, to have more fun than ever.’ And what about that first one: not to die? My mentor in this peer counseling community was well known for proclaiming that he would never die; that he would persist in his life energy, his life force. I call him one of my favorite humanists. Some of my best friends are humanists!

But we have a gospel good news about death, dying, and resurrection life that we get to proclaim and pursue in this Lenten season. Beginning with today’s scripture readings we have Psalm 19. Compare that Psalm to my parents getting smarter the older I get. In that Psalm, even God seems to sound better the older I get! Remember that psalm? How did that strike you when the choir sang,

The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul.

the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent.

The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart.

The fear of the Lord is clean and endures forever.

The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous all together, more to be desired than gold

and much fine gold; sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb.

By them also as your servant enlightened and in keeping them there is great reward.

(Psalm 19:7-11)

Now as a younger man, that was not my first take on law and judgment and statutes and fear. But God seems to be getting friendlier and friendlier.

We sang a hymn this morning, one verse of which was: “It’s because God loves us that God gives us law.” I’m

starting to get it. Give me some more guidelines, please God. The world is getting crazy out here. Chaos is taking over. Is there a track we can follow? Are there some channels? Is there some wisdom of the ages that keeps this madness from getting out of hand that we're living through? Thank God for the reward, for the sweetness of God's mind and wisdom.

Which then of course takes us right to our Epistle for today (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). Paul hits it right up front: "The message about the cross" (vs. 18). It's "foolishness" to those who experience life as an experience of perishing: of losing energy; of entropy; of passing out of existence. What's the poem by Yeats: the line that we're "fastened to a dying animal." I think it's his poem, "Sailing to Byzantium." We're 'fastened to a dying animal' as we watch ourselves with this carriage we carry around; the chassis in which we are encased as we watch it fail, and decline, and deteriorate.

So the way of the Cross is "foolishness to those who are perishing." But to us who are being rescued from perishing it is experiencing resurrection life, renewal decade after decade, experience after experience; life snatched from death, victory snatched from defeat, hope snatched from despair. Again and again, the grace of God is abounding, abundant, showing us, "Oh, I thought that was horror. I thought that was tragedy. I thought that was loss." But look, look what God has done. God's done it again. Brought renewal out of something I thought was death and dying. We are resurrection people.

It sounds foolish to embrace the Cross as the pathway to that; to embrace suffering and to say, "Hey, there's something in this crucifixion, in this cruciform pattern in my experience;" to say that God is blessing us through something which God is bringing about; blessing us through something that is more than I could have asked or thought of; the folly of which is becoming more and more like God's wisdom, as if God had figured it out—the big picture, the end run around the curve—to say that God is doing far more than we could have asked or imagined for us; that we now have eyes to see it, lips to proclaim and praise it, as if it were a great reward.

Well, every year this time, it's the month of my father's birth, who died in 2015 at the age of 95. My daughter who died at the age of nine in 1987; she would be 46 today. It's been 37 years. I think, you know, when she first died in 87, as a nine year old, I could sometimes hear her voice saying, "Daddy, pay attention. I'm trying to encourage you. I'm trying to say something to you about how happy I am. What's awaiting. What joy there can be in your life. Don't shut me out, Daddy." It got harder and harder then to hear that voice. It's getting easier and easier as I age now.

That's because there's something cruciform about our lives, at the other end of which is Easter. I have a Christian conceit. I call it a cruciform conceit. It would be a kind of Lenten Buyers Club. And I said this to one of our congregants here last Sunday. What if we put all our lives out in a room, say a Buyers Club or shop floor? And you could see the entail of each person's life in your network: 'the good, the bad, and the ugly;' the suffering, the sorrow, the triumphs, breakthroughs, the joy, the ecstasies? And what if you could see your bundle of life over there. Which one's life would you choose?

In our gospel proclamation, we claim that our lives have entered into the resurrection path, that they are joyous gifts from a loving God. And if we commit to live them, following God's path, we're promised renewal of life, resurrection life. And so this would be the opportunity to anticipate in these 40 days of Lent; to examine to scrutinize all those lives in your network. And yes, compare them to your own. And ask at the end of that examination, that Lenten scrutiny, ask or proclaim "What a bargain! I think I'll take it!"*

Amen.

* I am indebted to this expression to Coleman Barks's translation of the following poem by the Sufi mystical Persian (Iranian) poet, Rumi.

I would love to kiss you.
The price of kissing is your life.

Now my loving is running toward my life shouting,
What a bargain, let's buy it.

--*The Essential Rumi*; translated by Coleman Barks (Harper 1995)