

Sermon for Friday, April 3, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
is the most solemn day
of the church year.
On this day
we remember our Savior
who died for us.

And so we have sat in prayer,
in chant, in silence,
waiting with those
who waited
at the foot of the cross.

But this is not just a death watch,
nor is it a funeral.
This is a time
when we voluntarily confront
the power of death
and the greater power of life in Christ.
And so our chants,
a form of prayer from the Taize religious community in France,
have constantly reminded us
of the presence and love of God,
and our prayers
have invited us
to continue to praise God
even in this darkest of times.

The Taize community
has its roots in some of those dark times.
During the second world war,
Brother Roger moved from his home in Switzerland
to a small village in France, close to the demarkation line
between the occupied and free zones.

There he took up work that his grandmother had done in the first world war, sheltering refugees and sending them on their way to safe houses further south.

That's how the community began,
and ever since, the community has welcomed all who come to them,
and brothers have settled in some of the disadvantaged places in the world, in to be
witnesses of peace there, alongside people who are poor suffering,
and make pilgrimages of reconciliation
to places torn by war.

They leave everything behind
so that together
they can become a living parable of community
and the love of God.

Death and life,
suffering and joy
are bound together in their lives
as they follow the one
whose death and life
redeem our lives.

And so today, as we remember our Savior hanging on the cross,
I would like to share with you a reflection from Taizé:

“Death is the greatest enigma of the human condition. All we have built up for years and years, all that is beautiful in human life, seems to go up in smoke in the space of a moment. And then, at the very centre of the Christian faith, we find the symbol of a violent death.

In fact, from the beginning, death has never been at the centre of the Gospel. Faith begins with the proclamation of a Life more powerful than death: “He is risen!” It is in the light of the resurrection that death takes its place in the Christian scheme of things.

Contemplated in this light, death changes its significance. Without confidence in a Life greater than death, human beings remain paralyzed by fear, frozen on the edge of an abyss that they dare not face directly. But by consenting to give his life for love because he was borne by the certainty of an unbreakable communion with his Father, Christ took from death its “sting” (1 Corinthians 15:55), the fear of nothingness: “by dying he freed all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

In the company of Christ, then, dying can become a language able to express the total gift of self. By his existence, Jesus taught us “the law of the wheat grain”: “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). This “law” applies not only to physical death. It tells us rather that the road to Life inevitably involves a letting go, a refusal to cling at all costs to what we have achieved in order to journey with God towards what lies ahead of us and what is beyond all our hopes. We bear within us a life-giving seed that remains and blossoms in spite of everything.

In this sense, the first “death” we experience is our birth, when we leave behind the haven of our mother’s womb to confront the harsh realities of existence. Then, in the history of salvation, we have the example of Abraham, called to leave the world he knows to set out on an adventure with the Lord (see Genesis 12:1-4).

Later on, we find the example of the people of Israel, required to pass through the wilderness with its inevitable trials to reach the Promised Land. The cross is thus the total revelation of the true movement of life: “Whoever tries to preserve their life will lose it, and who loses it will keep it safe” (Luke 17:33).

Paradoxically, then, true death, in the negative sense of the term, is the refusal to risk one’s life with God. Those who wish to “preserve” or “save” their life at all costs, those who cling to what they already possess, are in danger of understanding nothing about authentic life. The cross of Christ reveals a way of dying that does not contradict the logic of life. In Christ’s company we realize that cross and resurrection are the two sides, the dark side and the bright side, of one and the same Love, of one and the same Life.”

Letter from Taizé: 2004/3;
http://www.taize.fr/en_article342.html