April 2010

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Dear Friends,

So here we are in Holy Week, which our students will soon find out when they get into the parish sometimes feels a lot more like "unholy week" because of all you have to do as a pastor. I remember years when I preached every day for five days, then on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, a Paschal Vigil, and numerous services Easter morning. At the end of that week I was exhausted, so I fully appreciate what our alums who are serving in the parish are dealing with this week. A couple of years ago, I had lunch the day after Easter with one of the area pastors in Pittsburgh. When I asked him how he was doing he replied, "Well, Jesus may be risen but I'm feeling a little piqued myself!" Welcome to Holy Week! From the moment Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was dead within the week.

Fast forward from Palm Sunday to the cross as we are doing this week and see Jesus at the end of his ordeal. His seven last words form a collage of his life—a whole ministry telescoped into seven little sentences. "Father forgive them"... "Today, you shall be with me in paradise." "Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother." "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me." "I thirst." "It is finished." And finally, "Into thy hands, I commit my spirit."

Notice that he begins and ends with a prayer. And what a prayer it is! An old Jewish prayer familiar to all who stood around the cross. It is a prayer learned from early childhood to be said by the bed every night. At our home, when our sons were growing up we had one prayer we said with them every single night:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
Glad and well may I awake
This I pray for Jesus' sake.

Jesus' last word on the cross was the Jewish version of this prayer borrowed from the Psalms. "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." It is the first prayer that a Jewish mother would teach her child to say the last thing at night. As the threatening dark of the night closed in she would pray with her child, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." Jesus' use of this childhood prayer at the hour of his death testifies to the simplicity of his trust in God. Death was for him the committal of his life into God's hands as he had done each night throughout his life with the full confidence that life would be his again beyond death. Not only life but glory.

I will never forget the last time I saw George Buttrick, my teacher and friend, one of the great preachers of the 20th century. He had been pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, preacher at Harvard, renowned author, and lecturer. But then as I stood beside
him, he was a frail little man in his upper 80s, his mind like a steel trap in a worn-out body. "Living on borrowed time," he growled to me. As I was about to leave I said, "Would you like for me to pray?" He nodded his head and smiled then put his hands together like a child, the way he had prayed at the beginning of class every day. He died as he had lived, with a childlike trust. That was the last time I saw him.

When you live with the Scriptures every day, you can die with the comfort of the Scripture. When your roots go deep in the will of God, nothing will shake you, not even death. And so at the gallows, a doctor says of Bonhoeffer, "in almost 50 years...I have hardly seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God." His last words were "this is the end...for me the beginning." When your roots go deep you are not so easily shaken. Even on the cross, Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his Father's arms.

But that's not the whole story, is it? For here we see a mixture of images because this expression of trust is not sorrowful. This is neither surrender nor defeat, but victory. Notice that the words are not said in a whimper or a whisper but in a loud, triumphant voice! There is a triumph here at every turn. Why is it that medieval artists paint Jesus as a poor, pitiful figure hanging lifeless on some monastery wall? Early Christian art, from the fourth century to the 13th century, portrays Christ as a crowned king on the cross: fighting on his last battleground, driving his foes in front of him. Nothing had gone wrong. Something had gone eternally right!

Watch him throughout the passion, striding through with head held high, while everyone else looks about furtively, nervously—Pilate and the crowd. He's like Sidney Carton in Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities who walks confidently to the guillotine taking the place of another. On the way he gives peace and courage to a young peasant woman. Dickens writes, "They said of him that night, that it was the peacefullest man's face ever beheld there. Many added that he looked sublime and prophetic." And what were his last words, according to Dickens? "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest that I go than I have ever known." "Into thy hands, I commend my spirit."

Christ was confident to the end. Confident and trusting, like the young rabbi in the German concentration camp during World War II who asked the Gestapo officer if he could worship with his people one last time before he and they were executed. With machine guns pointed at them, they prayed again as they had done every day. At the end of the service, the rabbi turned and said boldly. "Captain, I have finished. You may begin."

On the cross another young rabbi said to his Father, "I have finished. Into thy hands I commend my spirit." And so he died a victor over death and so he died a king. Little wonder that Handel's Messiah turns "Surely he has borne our grieves and carried our sorrows" into the Hallelujah Chorus. For the suffering servant does indeed become the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And the kingdom of this world is the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ; and yes, he shall reign forever and ever! Amen.

May your experience of Holy Week this year be rich, meaningful, and filled with hope and joy, not only this year, but throughout all your days.
God bless you all.

Bill

The Rev. Dr. William J. Carl III
President

Four-Part Lecture Explores Women and Ministry

Join us Wednesdays in April from 10:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m. for “Women, Ministry, and the Art of Leadership: Exploring New Terrain” The Rev. Dr. Susan Kendall, director of the Doctor of Ministry Program, will lead the course. This four-week series explores various aspects of leadership and ministry from different quadrants. Topics for discussion include "Boundaries and Dream", "Solitude and Compassion", "A Metalogue—the Bible and its Meaning" and "Leadership in a Bottle". Fee is $80. Contact the Office of Continuing Education at 412-924-1345 or ConEd@pts.edu for more information.

Urban Intensive Weekend Addresses Environmental Justice in the City

The Metro-Urban Institute's annual Urban Intensive Conference will be held April 8-10. “Becoming the Beloved Community: Environmental Justice in the City / Calling for the Order of the Day” is a three-day conference on Martin Luther King Jr.’s theology of the Beloved Community as a resource for strengthening churches through community outreach for social and ecological justice. The conference is designed to bring people of faith together to address ways to strengthen congregational vitality through community outreach and partnership for social and ecological justice. Fee is $75. Learn more and register online.

Archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel Discusses a Recently Discovered Inscription

The Bible Lands Museum will present “A New Inscription from the Time of King David?” Tues., April 13 at 7:30 p.m. in the Knox Room, Long Hall. Dr. Yosef Garfinkel, Hebrew University, will discuss his excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa, located near the Elah Valley and identified as biblical Sha'arayim. This event is free and open to the public. The Museum will be open from 5:30-7:15 p.m. and after the lecture. Contact the Bible Lands Museum at 412-924-1394 for more information.

Pneuma Presents “Context for Ignatian Discernment Today”

Pneuma: Spiritual Direction and Leadership Program at the Seminary will host “Context for Ignatian Discernment Today” Fri., April 16 from 7:30-9:00 p.m. in the John Knox Room, Long Hall. The Rev. Howard J. Gray, S.J., special assistant to the president, Georgetown University, Washington, DC will be the keynote speaker. Registration is $10 in advance or $15 at the door. Contact Dr. Martha Robbins at 412-924-1423 with questions. Registration
Spring Concert Held Wed., April 28

The Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Choir, under the direction of the Rev. George E. Tutwiler, organist-choirmaster, will present its annual Spring Concert Wed., April 28 at 7:30 p.m. in the Hicks Chapel Sanctuary. Come hear a selection of beautiful music!

Alumnae/i Days Held in Conjunction with Annual Lectures

Four distinguished alums will be honored during Alumnae/i Days, April 28-May 1. Alums receiving awards include the Rev. Frank K. Hare Jr. ’55/’58 (Pastoral Ministry), the Rev. Dr. William R. Myers ’67 (Academia), the Rev. Donald B. Patchel ’59/’60 (Mission), and the Rev. Del R Polling ’54 (Specialized Ministry). The Alumnae/i Banquet will be held Fri., April 30 at 6:30 p.m. Read more online.

The annual Albright-Deering Lectures in United Methodist Studies will be presented Thurs., April 29 at 2:00 and 3:30 p.m. Heather Murray Elkins, professor of worship, preaching, and the arts at Drew Theological School, Drew University, Madison, N.J. will present "Altar-ing the World: Sacramental Work and Worship. Lecture topics include "Thirst-making Water: Preaching in the Font" and "Bread-making Word: Presiding Under the Table". Conference Brochure

Also during Alumnae/i Days are the Henderson Lectures, Fri., April 30 at 11:30 a.m. and 2:30 and 4:30 p.m. This year's lecturer is Miroslav Volf, Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology and director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture at Yale University Divinity School, New Haven, Conn. Volf will address "The God of Jesus Christ and the God of Qu'ran". He will consider the implications of Christian and Islamic conceptions of God for our faith and inter-religious dialogue while specially addressing "The Same God? Why Does it Matter?", "The Same God? How Do We Decide?", and "The Same God? What about the Trinity?". Conference Brochure

These lectures are free and open to the public.

Professor Tuell Installed into Faculty Chair

The Rev. Dr. Steven S. Tuell will be installed into the James A. Kelso Associate Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Chair Thurs., April 29 at 7:30 p.m. in the Hicks Memorial Chapel. After studying at West Virginia Wesleyan College and Princeton Theological Seminary, Tuell earned his Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. He taught at Erskine College, S.C. (1989-1992) and Randolph-Macon College, Va. (1992-2005), receiving numerous awards for teaching excellence. Tuell's particular research interest is the biblical literature of the early Persian period. He is a member in full connection to the Western Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church, and preaches and teaches frequently throughout the area.

The Chair is named in honor of James A. Kelso, former professor and President of Western
Theological Seminary (an antecedent of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary).