

Second Sunday in Lent – February 25, 2018
The Rev. John Collins

In June, I will mark the third anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, which occurred across the street in St. Helen's Hall. Some of you will remember it because you either attended or help make it the truly memorable event that it was. It is customary for new priests to be assigned a mentor and Bishop Nedi asked Jed if he would be willing to serve in that capacity. Jed graciously agreed even though he had not been serving long as Rector of Trinity. Bishop Nedi also felt that it would be appropriate for me to split my time as priest between Trinity and Transfiguration in Sisters, which I have been more or less doing since my ordination.

In 1374, the English writer and poet Geoffrey Chaucer penned the words that today have become the aphorism "all good things must come to an end." After consultations with Bishop Pat, Jed and the new Rector at Transfiguration, Joseph Farber, it has been decided that I will return to Transfiguration to be the assisting priest there. I would note, however, that I do not intend for my relationship to totally end here at Trinity. It is just that I will be around much less. Over these last nearly three years I have come to love this congregation.

Jed, Gaye and all of you have been beyond gracious, as I have begun my life as a priest. Despite what one might think, seminary does not begin to teach you everything you need to know about being a priest. You all have been patient and kind as I have made the inevitable "rookie" mistakes as someone new to the business of being a priest. I have been privileged to be a part of a congregation that takes seriously the task of being the hearts and hands of Jesus in the world and know that I will very much miss being with you.

Speaking of being the hearts and hands of Jesus in the world, I think it is best that we now turn our attention to today's gospel reading that speaks powerfully to the issue of discipleship. If you will recall, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent is traditionally Transfiguration Sunday. On the mountaintop, Jesus encountered Elijah and Moses who told Jesus of what awaited him in Jerusalem. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus openly shares with the disciples what is to happen to him. Peter, as he is so wont to do, rebukes him. Apparently, for Peter such a fate for the Messiah, the Son of God, is unfathomable and unacceptable. Jesus, in turn rebukes Peter for not accepting what he was being told. Jesus goes on to then tell

them what the standards are if they are to be his followers – “If any of you 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” These, are to say the least, tough words that leave little wiggle room.

Jesus knew what awaited the twelve. Only John, of the original disciples, would die a natural death. The others would die violently for proclaiming the gospel, with the exception of Judas who as we know would hang himself for betraying Jesus. But what of us? Absent something we don't know, none of us will likely be martyred for being Christians. How then are we to understand the meaning of today's gospel reading in the context of our lives today? I think it is fair to draw some obvious conclusions. First, discipleship is not a spectator sport. Or, as Yoda told Luke Skywalker, “do or do not, there is no try.” Second, discipleship will not always be pleasant or come easy. Personal sacrifice will be required. And, lastly, discipleship must be a way of life.

Back at my home parish in Houston, I was involved with Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministry is a lay caring ministry generally for those undergoing life difficulties such as the death of a loved one, major illnesses, job loss, things of this nature. I was a Stephen leader and what we discovered is that individuals who were attracted to this ministry often had themselves suffered major losses or trials in their lives. Something about those experiences made them want to help others going through difficult times. Without going into specifics, that was certainly true for me as well. All of us have some sort of cross to bear in our lives, some much more serious than others to be sure. But it is our wounds, our brokenness that can allow us to express our humanity with one another. Perhaps, what Jesus is asking of us today is to let him unshackle our hearts, to use our own brokenness for the benefit of others.

Again, the gospel this morning tells us, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” The Greek word used for “life” in this passage does not directly translate into English. The closest would be the word “psyche,” which would be understood as the human mind, soul and spirit. In other words, Jesus is asking that we die to ourselves so that we can better serve the needs of others. That is certainly not an easy thing to do. We live in an inordinately fast-paced world.

We are bombarded by all sorts of media that tend to support a narcissistic view of life. We need look no further than the events that happened in Parkland, Florida recently and the three copycat threats in our schools right here in Bend this last week to understand the deep sickness that permeates our society today.

It is said that as preachers that we have a limited number of sermon themes we preach. One of my favorite themes, which you have heard me preach more than once, is that Jesus invites us to join him in changing the world. Let me repeat that – Jesus invites us to join him in changing the world. To do that, we must get outside of ourselves—our needs, our wants, our prejudices—to be present for others.

I heard one commentator say that the event that happened in Florida was the price we must pay for our freedom. Really? We must sacrifice fifteen children and two adults, only the most recent of such sacrifices, so that we may own assault weapons with no other purpose than to kill people? Our own Terry Rahmsdorff recently shared one of his stories with me. Jesus has returned and is sitting on a park bench. A man comes up to him and starts a conversation. After a little while, the man asks Jesus, “One thing I don’t understand. Why do you allow such evil and violence in the world?” Jesus pauses for a moment and looks the man in the eye and says, “Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing.”

My brothers and sisters we are called to action, now more than ever. I realize that in many ways I am preaching to the choir. This congregation does so much in helping Jesus to change the world. But the world we currently live in is awash in violence, hatred and division. At times like this it would be easy to despair and lose hope, but instead let us redouble our efforts to share the light of Christ in a world that so desperately needs it. I would like to close with a simple, sweet story that I think speaks to the transformation that our Lord wants for each and everyone of us.

In his book *Written In Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. She had a rare blood type which she shared with her little brother. The fact that he had recovered from the same disease two years earlier made the chances of success even greater. The doctor carefully explained all this to the little boy, pointing out that without the transfusion his sister would die.

“Would you be brave and give your blood to your sister” the doctor asked? Johnny hesitated. His lower lip began to tremble. Then he smiled and said, “Sure, for my sister.” The two children were wheeled into the hospital room – Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. He smiled at his sister, then watched as the blood travelled out of his body, down the clear plastic tube. Johnny’s smile faded, and as he lay there feeling weak he looked up at the doctor and said, “Doctor, when do I die?”

Johnny thought that giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. Yet because of his great love for her he was prepared to pay the price.