

“Asking for Help” by Anthony Robinson. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith.” *Romans 1:1* ‘I once asked Jim Forbes, a professor of at Union Seminary to help me understand the difference between predominately white and predominately black churches. I asked because I experienced a power in the worship of the black church that I didn’t often find elsewhere. Jim, whose background was in an African-American Pentecostal church, pondered my question, then said, “In predominately Caucasian congregations people believe God needs them; in predominately African-American churches, people understand that they need God.” Of course, that’s a generalization, but so was my question. And there’s a truth in those words real in my own life in this way: for much of my life I have found it easier to offer help than to ask for help. Admitting “I need help,” can be a tough thing to do. Even, in a way, shameful. As the apostle Paul began his letter to the Romans he said a striking thing. “I am not ashamed of gospel.” Why would he have been ashamed of the gospel? Paul was a man who had worked hard to attain perfection and status by his own efforts. An unexpected encounter with Jesus led Paul to a sudden realization: the one thing he most needed was to accept the help, and the grace, of God. To embrace the gospel was to embrace help and to not be ashamed that he needed it. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith.” In the end, the two parts of Jim’s answer to my question are a both/and. As we accept grace ourselves, we become gracious to others’.

Mark 8:31-38

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

“Standing Up With Jesus”

“If anyone would come after me,
he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Mark 8:34b

“On August 8, 1943, the night before he was beheaded for refusing to fight for Hitler’s army, Franz Jagerstatter sat in a Berlin prison cell, deep in intimate prayer with God. On the table in front of him lay a piece of paper, a promise to serve in the Nazi Medical Corps. All he had to do was sign his name and the Nazis would let him live. He refused to do so. From his early years he had spoken against Nazi militarism and criticized the church for giving into Nazi demands. A few hours before his death he wrote to his wife: “It is still best that I speak the truth, even if it costs me my life.”

And Jesus explained to his disciples: “I must go to Jerusalem and suffer much from the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. I will be put to death, but three days later I will be raised to life.”

The cell scene and the necessity of suffering of Jesus haunts us. Our reaction is like Peter’s, who rebuked Jesus, saying: “God forbid it! That must never happen to you!” That the Messiah should come as a suffering servant, shamed on the cross, is counter-intuitive and confounding. It’s hard to imagine how the deadly image of the cross could ever become a life-giving symbol. And, it’s difficult to hear Jesus’ call to deny oneself, not as a call for self-effacement, but rather as an affirmation of oneself as a child of God who is able to see the Son of Man come in glory as king. The chaplain who visited Franz Jagerstatter in prison the night before his execution said that his eyes shone with a joy and confidence that he would never be able to forget.

. . . Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Jesus said to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

The Lenten season in Christ's Church offers a variety of spiritual practices that help us discover how we fail to deny ourselves and follow Jesus in the way of the cross. In addition to prayer, almsgiving, and fasting, meditation on the seven deadly sins has proven helpful to God seekers throughout the ages. It's possible that all seven, (pride, avarice, envy, greed, lust, anger, sloth) contributed to Peter's rebuke of Jesus and the setting of his mind on human things. But, in light of the mass slaughter of our teenage innocents, it's sloth that claims my attention today.

What is sloth? Sloth is laziness. Generally, laziness is seen as a weakness rather than a human virtue. Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck 'says that laziness is a major cause of evil and a primary source of psychological illness. It prevents us from making loving relationship' (Seven Deadly Sins by M. Dunman, p. 98). Laziness has both inward and outward characteristics. Sloth attacks our will with the symptoms of "I don't care", "not my responsibility," "it doesn't matter," faintheartedness and "spectator satisfaction." Maxie and Kimberly Dunman in the 'Seven Deadly Sins' (p.99) offer some descriptions of what it feels like within when laziness has done us in. 'We're dead when the suffering of another causes us no pain. We're dead when our blood does not run hot in the face of injustice. We're dead when we are not willing to put forth the energy necessary to save a dying relationship.' It's the tombstone inscription by George Bernard Shaw: Died at 30, buried at 60. An outward symptom of sloth is the absence of doing acts of compassionate care. In Christian spirituality, sloth denies the need to take care of the things of God. Sloth is indifferent and avoids taking responsibility for the love and justice demands of the gospel.

On February 15, Scott Beigel, Aaron Feis, Alussa Alhjadeff, Martin Dugue Anguiano, Nicholas Dworet, Jaime Guttenberg, Christopher Hixon, Luke Hoyer, Cara Loughran, Gina Montalto, Joaguin Oliver, Alaine Petty, Meadow Pollack, Helena Ramsay, Alex Schachter, Carmen Schentrup, Peter Wang were gunned down at school. Ten days later, sloth is having its way with the soul of our nation. We are dead. Our blood is not running hot enough to stand up against the NRA and demand that congress

produce legislation to ban all rapid fire assault weapons. We are dead. We don't have the energy to creatively interpret the second amendment for the saving of lives. We are dead, save for those teenaged souls who hid in the closets of their classrooms and saw their classmates, friends, and beloved teachers die when a former student of theirs opened fire with an AR-15. These teens, most of whom are not old enough to vote, are organizing a march in Washington D.C. and in other cities around the country on March 24 to call for stricter gun control legislation to prevent yet another mass shooting at a school or elsewhere—from happening in the U.S. It's called, "March for our Lives." "My message for the people in office", said survivor Cameron Kasky, "is you're either with us or against us. We are losing our lives while the adults are playing around. "We have to be the adults in this situation," echoed Jaclyn Corin," because clearly people have failed us in the government, and we must make the change now."

Back in his day, sloth did not have a hold over Franz Jagerstatter. He stood up with Christ Jesus, refusing to fight in Hitler's army. He spoke out against Nazi militarism, and criticized the church for giving into Nazi demands. And on the Saturday after the shooting, sloth did not have its way with students gathered on the high school campus carrying signs which read: "enough is enough" --- "prayers and condolences are not enough." Last Sunday, we prayed for the seventeen teenagers who died. The question for us this week is: "It that enough?". There's an old Russian proverb that teaches: "Pray to God, but continue to row to the shore." Joan Chittister explained: Dependence on God is not a substitute for doing God's will to the utmost ourselves. We can pray for peace, for instance, but unless we ourselves do something to bring it, it is an empty prayer, a kind of spiritual blasphemy. (Art of Living, p. 16).

Jesus said: If anyone would come after me,

He must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. I'm glad that doing something to end mass shootings is what we do if we want to be followers of Jesus. And I am thankful for Jesus, who heads us in the right direction and keeps us rowing to the shore.