

Only Service Entrance in Heaven

When I was 18 years old, I first came to America
to work on summer student visa.
I worked in Dallas, Texas as a waiter.
It was a fancy, upscale restaurant
and I was able to earn lots of money.
I took a second waitering job at Loews Hotel downtown on weekends.
I always remember it with great affection.
I worked harder in the hotel and earned less
than I did in the fancy restaurant where I earned a lot more.
Once you work at a hotel as a waiter,
one sees what most people do not see,
just how hard the waiters and all the staff work in hotels.

There is one rule that could get you fired right away.
That is the rule if you, as an employee, come through the front door
you are immediately terminated.
No questions asked. Immediately fired.
And it is written in your contract.
You are only allowed to come through the service entrance.
The service entrance is always at the back of the hotel.
It is a grubby sort of a way to get in;
there are certainly no potted plants and beautiful valet drivers at the back.
It is often a nondescript door and entrance with a punch code.
You go in and it is usually through a dark hallway.

I always like to see how hotels treat their staff.
I always like to look at the service entrance
because it tells you how they treat their staff.
If the service entrance is any way decent
then they think highly of their staff.
If it is just like a goods entrance
then they do not really care too much about their staff,
no more than the goods they receive!

When I was a kid, I always thought of heaven as a big palace, a big hotel,
where you had first class service.
You just check in and it's like luxury service from then on;

you get served from the moment you arrive. Right?

I know it is a childish image but was sort of thought of in catechism class!

The older I get I have come to realize
that is not quite the entrance into heaven.

There is only one entrance into heaven
and that is through **the service entrance**.

It is the only way to get into heaven.

I am more convinced every day that there is no front door in heaven.

That is just a façade.

The only way to get into heaven is through this service entrance.

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus actually lay out just that case:

I give you a model to follow:

“Do what I have done for you for each other.

Serve one another. Love one another.”

If there is ever any doubt that you are going to get into heaven
through the front entrance this gospel dispels it very quickly.

The only way for us to assure ourselves of this is
that we receive God's love and allow God to love us completely.

That is no small task in itself

because we have to deal with all our baggage
and allow God to love us just the way we are.

And then we pass that love to others and serve them.

The people who washed the feet

were the lowest on the totem pole of the household.

So it was not just an ordinary servant,

it was the lowest of all the servants who washed the feet.

And if there were no servants then it was the women of the house;

and if there were no women in the house,

each person would actually wash their own feet.

They would never allow the host to wash their feet.

It was considered beneath them.

It was too much humility.

But Jesus obliterates this understanding.

He takes off his outer garment,

he puts on a towel and starts to wash the feet of his disciples.

Peter, always the one to protest says,
 “No, you are not going to be that to me!”
 And he immediately confronts Jesus saying,
 “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.”
 Peter realized his mistake and says,
 “Then not just my feet then my hands and my whole body too!”
 We have to get that mindset that we want to be like Peter.
 We too often misunderstand what it means to serve.

What does it mean to serve for each of us?

It is different for all of us.
 For some of us, we are doing it constantly day after day after day;
 we are pouring our life out for our children.
 To ask those to serve more would be absurd
 because they have already poured their life into their children.
 There is nothing more to give.
 For those, the challenge is to allow others to serve them.
 That is the challenge for them.
 Remember it says, “Serve one another.”
 Not that you are the one always pouring out.
 To a certain extent when we pour ourselves out,
 we are still somewhat in control of the situation.
 So for you tonight coming forward to have your feet washed
 is going to be deeply uncomfortable
 because you do not like being served.
 Mothers in particular. It is the hardest
 because you are so at it all the time.
 Go. Go. Go. Go. Go. Allow others to serve you.

Now for the rest of us, we have to step up our game.
 And what I mean by that is we have to take note.
 There are a lot of children here, and young people.
 You cannot go out and earn money. We get that.
 You cannot go out and cook all the food. I get it.
 You cannot do it all. I get that.
 What we can do is recognize Mom or Dad who are cooking;

or who are going out and getting all the stuff.

You can say, "Can I help you?"

You can acknowledge the hard work they do
and stand with them as they do it.

You can be the first one to offer to set the table;
to clean the dishes; to clean out the dishwasher,
whatever the chores of the house are.

You recognize and see that your role is to be grateful in service.

Then all of us are called to open our eyes to those around,
who so desperately need a helping hand.

We do it when we bring in the homeless here
and there are far more than 15 people in need in our county.

We need to continuously challenge ourselves in how we serve those?

We can at least acknowledge that homeless person.

We can look at them eye to eye and recognize their humanity;

We ought not to condemn all immigrants just because they are immigrants.

We strive to understand the complex, human stories
behind those human beings and allow them to share their stories.

When there is a group such as the LGBT group
that is ostracized from so many parts of the country
that we are willing to listen to their story
and be willing to acknowledge the humanity
behind their own story and welcome them back into our community.

There are so many other ways in which we can be the community
that reaches out with open hands in service to others.

Now more than ever does our community, does our world,
need people who are willing to be servants;
willing to love as Christ loved.

Christ gave us the model.

Wash each other's feet.

Serve one another.

Love one another and allow others to love you.

It is hard.

Tonight may we think about the people in our life
that we are called to recognize and love.

As we wait in line to have our feet washed
think of all those people in our lives that do serve us already
and offer thanks to them in our heart.

Then ask ourselves, "Can we acknowledge their service,
can we then serve them?"

Tonight, may we do for one another as Christ has done for us.

Remember, there is no entrance to heaven except the service entrance.

Listen to the Heart of Jesus

On Spy Tuesday this year we read this same gospel of John
but we read the section that actually follows this section from today
—the betrayal of Christ by Judas.
The Church puts these in this position on the liturgical calendar
because they really follow one another.
In the gospel we hear on Tuesday,
they are wondering who it is that will betray Jesus.
So Peter tells John, the beloved disciple,
because he is sitting, reclining closest to Jesus,
“Ask him who is it?”
So an incredibly intimate moment happens next.
The beloved disciple, John, leans on Jesus’ chest with his ear to his heart
and says “who is it Jesus?”

Often we can overlook some important details in the gospel.
This is an incredible, intimate moment
yet it is overshadowed by the darkness of Judas’ betrayal.
Think for a moment of that scene:
they are lying down at table and John leans on his chest
and can hear his heartbeat and says “who is it?”
That is the preeminent image of discipleship
—that of listening to the heart of Jesus.
It is so easy to get caught up in the ways of being a disciple
and often we do not listen to the heart of Jesus.

Of course, the heart of Jesus is that of love,
which he had just symbolized in this reading that we read tonight.
He asks his disciples
—do you understand what I have done for you?
Of course, he knows the answer.
They do not. They do not get it yet.
And so we hear the part of Judas’ betrayal
and then he returns and explicitly says,
“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Now bear in mind what has happened.

We listen to the heart of Jesus.

We serve as Jesus served.

And remember why we do it
—because we love one another.

The purpose for us to listen to the heart of Jesus
is so that we can come to know who to serve.

We know that we are called to serve but when we listen to Christ,
we ask who it is that we are called to serve today.

The job that Jesus does with the disciples
of washing the feet of the disciples was a humble job.
It was the job of the servant of the servants.
If there were 10 servants in the household
then the servant who washed the feet was the one who was the last,
on the bottom of the pole.
If there were no servants in the household,
then it was the youngest child in the household
and if no child in the household, then it was the woman.
That was the pecking order of the society.

The idea is that Jesus picks that up and exalts the lowly and says,
“That is what I want you to do.”
He doesn't say it—he does it—he washes the feet of his disciples.
Peter, always the one who completely misunderstands things, says,
—oh, no, no, no you are never going to wash my feet. Not mine.
Jesus says, “If I do not wash your feet
then you can have no part of my kingdom.”
Then comes the typical Peter overreaction again
—well then, not just my feet, Lord, wash my whole body as well.
He wants to be sure he gets into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus reminds him that it is not the purpose.
It is just to wash the feet.
Just serve who you have been asked to serve.
You do not have to break your neck to serve everyone.

We are all called to do our part.
So the question is—are we listening to the heart of Jesus?
Are we really opening our own hearts and
listening closely to what Jesus wants of us?
And who is it that Jesus wants me to serve?
For everyone, it is going to be slightly different.
We do not have to serve everyone.
The Lord is not saying that you completely exhaust yourself.
He didn't. He served his 12 and
then they served others and they served yet others.

We are called to serve.
We are called to love.
When you come forward today to have both your feet washed,
I ask you to get your shoes and socks off and come forward.
I want you to think about two things.
“Who am I called to serve?”
Who in my life am I called to get down on my knees and serve?
And as you wash the feet of someone today think of that person.

The second thing I want you to ask yourself is:
“Who do I need to let serve me?”
That may seem like an odd question
but in fact it might be a little bit more difficult
especially for the mothers here
because we generally do not like others to serve us.
Mothers, you are the ones who most often do all the serving in our homes.
You spend yourself out endlessly for us;
you pour yourselves out constantly.
Tonight I want you to think about who would you let serve you?
Will it be your child?
Will it be your spouse?
Will it be a friend?
We must be willing to be served.

It is not just about some symbol here.

This is meant to transform our lives.

We are called to get down on bended knee

to do as Christ did not because it is the washing of feet here

but because it is the washing of feet out there.

But to do so we must lean in close to Christ's heart.

We must rest our head on his chest and

we must be willing to listen to his heart beat and

say, Jesus, who do you want me to serve today?

Absorb and Transform

The key that unlocks the mystery in the life of Christ is the Cross.

If we truly comprehend the Cross
then we have the wisdom of the Cross
and the brokenness of the one who died upon the Cross.
If we can grasp that reality then
we have the key to understanding the rest of our lives. ⁱ

The Cross is a pivot point in Christ's life.

He switches from this person who gives active love to passive love.
Throughout his entire life he was giving, healing,
and proclaiming the gospel.
He challenged but it was always done with love and healing words.
Then he shifts to passive love and silence in the sight of evil.
There are no words. Nothing! He just absorbs everything:
the hate; the punches; the kicks; the whips;
the nails and even the crucifixion and death itself.
He absorbs it and transforms it.
He transforms the cross into a life-giving symbol for us.

That sounds great but how do we understand it?

We use these words like
“Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”
That is great but how are we to internalize it?
How are we to understand that in our being?
The best metaphor is from Ron Rolheiser, that of the water purifier.
Think of what a water purifier does.
It takes in water that is polluted and contaminated.
It takes it in and it absorbs in all the pollutants,
transforms it and gives back clean water.
This is the very thing that Christ does in this Cross.

He takes in hatred, absorbs it in, transforms it and gives back love.

He takes in bitterness, absorbs it, transforms it and gives back graciousness.
He takes in chaos absorbs it and gives back order.
He takes in fear, absorbs it and gives back freedom.
He takes in jealousy, absorbs it and gives back affirmation.
He takes in murder and Satan and absorbs it, transforms it

and gives back God and love.

He takes in the sin of the world, absorbs it and gives back forgiveness.

The Cross is the ultimate, hidden secret of Christianity.

We cannot understand Christ

until we understand the profundity of the Cross.

And when I say “understand it” I mean more than intellectualize it.

We have to existentially absorb it into our being.

We have to take it in and live that reality.

Every one of us, on our best day, is a good water purifier.

On our best day, we try.

We know we need to do it intellectually.

We get it. And we try hard.

But if you are like me, there are plenty of days

where you do not do it.

There are plenty of days when I gave back just what was given to me.

They gave me some harsh words.

I gave them back even more.

I did not do what I knew I should do.

There are times when we just give in.

And we give back like an electrical cord maybe even supercharged.

We give back exactly what we have been given.

We are called to not just be admirers of Jesus Christ.

We are called to be followers.

Imitators of Christ.

That is what we are called to do.

We are called to be this constant water purifier.

But we cannot do it alone!

If we think we will do it alone,

I can guarantee you it is a project of absolute failure.

It will fail eventually because it is just us
against the forces of evil.

Those forces will keep on coming
until we eventually buckle and we give in.

We are called to help one another;
to look to Christ and then to look to his disciples

as the example of how to be this way
and then to help each other.

Now the preeminent example, the exemplar of discipleship is Mary.

Look at what happens at the Cross.

Mary *stands* at the foot of the Cross.

She is not broken and buckled.

She stands.

Defiant at what has happened.

She does not buckle under the pressure.

She does not do any whining and saying,

“What are you doing to my Son?”

She takes it the same way Christ did.

She absorbs it in. All that hate towards her Son,

all those beatings and even watching her Son get crucified before her
and she does not buckle.

She remains completely focused on her Son, on Jesus.

And that gives her the strength to endure.

Jesus, knowing how hard it would be, said to his mother,

“Take John as your son;

and John, be a son to my mother.”

From his last breathes, he is telling us we have to do it together.

We cannot do it alone because that is how the devil gets us;

he separates us; pushes us off alone;

and then we buckle on our own.

And we give back what we have been given.

Instead, when we bind ourselves together,

we find the strength to absorb in the hatred.

And to give back love.

We find the strength together to absorb in the bitterness

and to give back blessings.

We absorb the jealousy and give back affirmation.

We absorb the sin and give back forgiveness.

The only way we can do this is by being there for one another.

I know that so many of us in this community

have lost loved ones this last year.

Have had significant issues in extended families
and we have lots of pain and suffering.
And there are times when we are great
at absorbing in all that poison and pain
and we do our best to give back all the good things,
love, forgiveness, etc.
But there are times when we need help from each other.
There are times when we shoulder each other.
We cannot take their sins.
We cannot take their wounds.
We cannot do any of that for them
but what we can do is to be there
so that they do not buckle under the pressure.
Just as John the beloved disciple is for the mother
and the mother is for the beloved disciple.

Today my friends the reason we call this Good Friday
is not because what happens on the Cross is good
but what happens *through the Cross that makes it good*.
We have been given an incredible model of
how we are to transform this world.
We will all have our crosses.
And we will all have our resurrection if we believe in Christ.

Today, we come to venerate the Cross.
We come knowing that we have pain,
knowing that we have suffering,
knowing that we have wounds,
some more than others, but we come together
and we hold each other up in our moments of weakness
so that together we will believe in the power of the Cross.
Christ crucified is the way to the Christ of the Resurrection.
The Cross is the hidden secret of Christ's life.

¹ Ron Rolheiser, *The Passion and Cross of Christ*.

Touch Where There are No Wounds

During my 30-day silent retreat I did discursive meditation

—I meditate on the scripture passage or on different scenes of Jesus.

Sometimes, they are part of scripture;

sometimes they are alongside scripture to help us

to break open some of the deeper meanings.

We are to imagine ourselves in the scene

and then you play back what happens in the scene and write about it.

One particularly powerful and yet difficult scene

that I was asked to meditate on was not a scriptural passage

—it is the time when Jesus is condemned to death

and before he takes the cross and goes up to Calvary.

Imagine yourself in the praetorium alone with Jesus.

He has just been scourged and he is awaiting to get his cross

and you go in there and imagine yourself talking or being with Christ.

I imagine myself coming in and what I saw shocked me.

Jesus was lying face down on the dirt floor.

His whole back and legs and every part of his body

was covered in open wounds from the scourging.

There wasn't any part of his body

that was not covered in open wounds, oozing with blood.

I get down on my knees and I cry, “What have they done to you?”

Jesus barely moves and instinctively I put my hand out to touch him

and he winces in pain because my hand touches a series of wounds.

I immediately jump back in shock that I have further hurt him.

Instead I lean down close to his face and I say,

“Jesus, it's Brendan.

I've just come to be with you before they crucify you.”

He looks up, barely able to open his eyes and nods in agreement.

I knew there was nowhere else I could touch him.

Then he rolls over and he puts his head on my lap
as he struggles to prop himself up.

As I look at the front of his body, I see that it is covered
with as many welts, bruises and open wounds.

There is no place left to touch him.

There is nowhere to touch but the palm of his hand.

So I touch the palm of his hand.

He acknowledges my presence with blinking at me.

Then I realize that his ‘crown of thorns’ sitting in my lap

is now imbedded completely in my lap
and there is pouring blood from my legs.

My legs now were in aching pain
but I think what little suffering there will be
—to give him a moment of comfort.

I realize now that my blood is mixing with his blood,
both warm pouring down my leg.

Just then, I spy out of the corner of my eye one piece of his body
just above his heart where there was no open wound.

I put my hand down just above his heart.

He smiles as he looks and nods approvingly.

No pain as I touch him on his chest.

No pain as I touch his hand.

It is great comfort to him but even more comfort for me
that I can now touch him without causing him more pain.

Then he says slowly,

“Brendan, people are covered in wounds.

They have them internally and externally.

You need to find a way to touch people
where they do not have a wound so that they can be healed.

When you touch them in their wounds
even though you are trying to help,

they react and pull back just as I have.
Teach others not to touch each other's wounds
because it really hurts even though you are trying to help.”

How often we touch each other's wounds?

I think even as siblings
—we don't touch, we poke at each other's wounds
and almost gain some twisted pleasure
as we push the buttons of our siblings.
We know it is a weak spot but we keep on pushing and pushing
until we see a yelp in pain
and then there is this twisted, twisted pleasure.
I don't know where it comes from.
Even spouses do it to one another.
I have often seen it.
They keep on pushing and pushing until they get the reaction.
That is called love in the family?
Why do we do that?
Why is it that we insist on not just touching
but poking at each other's wounds?
Those are the people we know.
Those are the people we go to, claim to love.
How much more do we do it to those whom don't know so well?

Friends, we have to be careful to not touch each other's wounds.

Life is already full of so much pain and suffering and discomfort.
We don't need to create any more by intentionally
poking the wounds of Christ—of each other.

When Christ became one of us and suffered what he suffered

—he did so out of love for us.
He did so that we could know without any shadow of doubt
that God became human and knows the complete human condition.
We cannot say he doesn't know.
He couldn't understand.

No. He does.
He's been there. Did it.

He took those pokes—the mockery
—I mean just bear in mind he was God.
He didn't even have to blink to obliterate anyone
who was thinking of hurting him.
And he chose not to. Why? Why did he choose not to?
Because it is the power of love that changes people
and nothing else changes others.
If we think we are going to change our spouse
or our sibling or somebody else
when we touch their wounds,
let me assure you it will not ever change their behavior.

Ask yourself—how do you like your wounds being touched?
How do you like your weak spots being exposed to others?
The reality is—we do not.
And none of us grow ever.
None of us ever heal or grow by somebody poking at our wounds.
It will never happen.
The only way that we can heal our wounds
or the wounds of others is when we love.
When we gently find the one place where it does not hurt
—and we touch there
—and we hold there and we treat them with dignity
and we say I am here.
“It's me. I will walk with you in your pain.
I will walk with you in your suffering.
I will not touch your wounds.
I will love you.”
That heals!

That is the profound message of the cross.
Christ comes to every one of us and says,

“I love you. I will not touch your wounds.
I will only heal you from your pain and your weakness.”

Today as we come forward to venerate the cross and to kiss this cross,
I ask you to think of your siblings, your spouse,
maybe your parents, your neighbors whoever it is
and think of their wounds and when you have pushed them.
Then think of your own wounds and those who have pushed your wounds.
And ask the Lord to heal you from your sins and your own wounds.
We touch his cross to give us the strength to love others
and to not touch their wounds
but to love them despite their wounds.

It is About How We React

When we witness such a passion play tonight,
it is hard to not wonder how could they be so cruel;
how could they do this to our Lord?
How could they do this to any human being?
And yet they did.
In fact, they crucified thousands and thousands of people every week.
The Romans wanted the cross to be feared by all people of the empire.
They wanted the cross to be terrifying in every aspect of it.
When we witness something like tonight or listen to it,
it is hard not to be moved and to think who was responsible for this.
We look at it from a distance.
Yet if we think of it a little differently,
we realize that we ourselves have often been cruel to others.
We may not have nailed somebody to the cross;
we may not have whipped somebody
but we have had our dark moments.
We have had our moments of weakness.

Think for a moment

—what is the moment in your life that you are least proud of?
Some moment when you said something or did something
that not only are you ashamed of
but maybe even the mere thought of it makes you sick now.
Nobody else may even notice.
You may have never even thought about it until this very moment.
There is a part of us that gets sick
when we think of that moment of weakness
—the time that you said to your wife that you hate her;
the time that you said to your husband that you despise the sight of him.
Or the time that you said to your parent I hate you.
Or whether it was a multitude of other things
we might have said or done in the heat of the moment.

What if I was to take that moment now and put it up on the screen?

How would we like to be defined by our weakest, weakest moment?

How would we like to be known only by our weakest moment?

Society tells us that our weakest moments are exactly how we are defined; that we are who we are in that weakest moment.

That is what society would have us believe.

The Lord Jesus Christ says something different.

He says that we are never our weakest moment if we believe in Him.

“Believe in me and I will show you another way,” says Christ.

“I will show you the path of forgiveness,
but you must believe in me.”

Tonight we hear in the story of two different men
who were defined by their weakest moments;
one was Judas and one was Peter.

Judas betrayed Jesus and went off and hung himself
because he was repulsed by the mere thought of his weakest moment;
he believed the secular world of his time.

Peter, on the other hand, recognized his weakest moment,
saw it as the darkest moment of his life
but still looked to the Lord and said,

“Lord, forgive me; Lord, forgive me. Lord, forgive me.”
And Jesus did forgive.

Ultimately we are defined in some way by our weakest moment

—but not by the weakest moment itself

—as much as what we do *after* the weakest moment.

How we react to our weakest moment.

That is what really defines us.

We saw tonight as the ultimate model of
how to deal with our weakest moment

—Christ Jesus, hanging on a cross,
whipped and beaten for something he had never done;
crucified for something he had never done
and yet what does he do?

“Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they have done.”
 From the cross Jesus says to his best friend and his mother,
 “My brother, love my mother; mother, love my best friend.”

We are called to model our lives after Peter and not Judas;
 after Christ and not the Evil One.

We are called to turn back towards God
 at our weakest moment and to ask for forgiveness.
 But if we are going to ask for forgiveness
 then we must realize that others, too, have weak moments
 —others, too, have the darkest moments of their lives
 that often we are witness to
 and we are called to forgive them in those moments.
 Now I am not saying it is easy; it is not.
 When somebody has deeply hurt you, it is hard to forgive.
 And it may even seem impossible to forgive.
 But nothing is impossible for Christ.

Why are we so cruel to one another?

I don't know.
 I do know this that we continue to be cruel to one another
 when we do not let go.
 We continue to hold over each other's heads,
 the evils that we have done
 —the darkness of our weakest moments
 —we hold it over their head and we say:
 “I remember.
 Don't think I have forgotten what you said
 and we hold it as a hostage over them for the rest of their lives
 —holding it deep within our hearts.
 When we do that,
 we are playing into the darkness and not the light.

The darkest part of any night is just before the dawn.

Today, we stand in the darkest night of our Church year called Good Friday
 where all candles are extinguished from the altar;

where all lights are put out
because the presence of Christ is removed from the tabernacle
and we bathe in the darkest night
only to focus our attention on the dawn of the Resurrection;
that Christ is risen and there is light beyond our darkness;
there is life beyond our mistakes.
There is life beyond our weakest moments.

Please do not believe society when they tell us
that we are defined by our weakest moments;
we are not.
We are defined on how we react to our weakest moment.
Tonight we come to venerate the cross
not because it is an instrument of death
but because Christ gained victory in and through the cross.
He accepted the cross as the way to the Resurrection.
We too must accept our crosses.
We too must accept the darkness
that leads to the bright light of our own resurrection
but we first must come to ask for forgiveness.
We must first acknowledge that we have those weakest moments
when we have said the ugliest things;
moments when we have done the worst of things.

Tonight as you come to venerate the cross,
we leave those things at the foot of this cross
and to allow the bright life of God's love through Christ to embrace us;
to be free from your darkest moments;
to receive Christ once again in the Eucharist refreshed;
to be ready for a new dawn.
Tonight we come to ask for forgiveness of Christ;
to lay down our weakest moments;
to take up the light of Christ;
to offer forgiveness to others who have hurt us.

“Good” Friday

There is a wonderful short story by O. Henry

that is set in the middle of the last century in New York City.

There are two elderly women, Joanna and Sue,

trying to survive the coldest winter on record.

Joanna is suffering from pneumonia and

is getting sicker as each colder day goes by.

There is no heating and they struggle to survive.

Joanna looks out the window every single morning

and they see the leaves dropping off a vine

on the wall opposite their apartment.

Joanna says to Sue,

“When the last leaf of that vine falls to the ground,
my time will have come to the end.”

At this stage there was only one last leaf left on the vine.

Sue tells to her neighbor, Behrman, a kind old man

about how tough things have got for the two of them.

Behrman had struggled all his life trying to be an artist

and was somewhat of a failed artist.

That next day, Joanna and Sue woke up and opened up the blinds

and they were relieved to see that today was not the day.

The leaf was still on the vine.

Joanna said to Sue, “Heat up some milk and

we’ll have some milk and oatmeal; today is not the day.”

The other members of the apartment started to talk

and they thought it was strange that

Behrman had spent the coldest evening on record outside

painting on the wall opposite the apartment

until they found out what he had painted.

He had painted a leaf on the wall behind the vine

so when Joanna looked out, there was always one leaf for her.

He died that day but he died giving a purpose;

he sacrificed his own life for the life of these two neighboring women.ⁱ

Today we celebrate Good Friday;

we celebrate that Christ laid down his life for us;

it wasn't just for one single day and it was not a painting, it was for real.
 Every day we are called to look upon the cross
 knowing that Christ laid down his life so that we would have life,
 that we would know that life as we know it, goes to eternal life
 and that he came to share that powerful message with us.
 That message we must never, never forget.

Have you ever wondered to yourself,
 “Why is Good Friday called Good Friday?”
 Why is it that when we see the Lord scourged
 and then hung up on a cross:
 Why do we call it good?
 How could that be good?
 How could suffering on a cross—how can dying be a good thing?
 It is not good because of his suffering;
 it is not good because he was tortured;
 it was good because this was not a loss or a failure;
 this was victory for humanity.
 His death took the sting from death.
 Death had no more power.
 Christ now proved through his loving sacrifice
 that we had no more reason to fear death.

The cross and the resurrection are intimately related.
 We cannot have the resurrection without the cross.
 We cannot have the cross without the resurrection.
 So we celebrate today because today,
 Good Friday is good for humanity.
 Today it is good because of all that came from this day 2,000 years ago.
 Just like a soldier is called a good soldier
 when he lies down his life for his country;
 so too we call this Good Friday because Christ laid down his life for us.

Then the question becomes what are we to do?
 We are not asked to get our own cross;
 we are not asked to be nailed to the cross;
 we are not asked to be flogged.
 We are asked to live in Christ's memory.

What does that mean to us?

We are asked to live as Christ called us to live,
to love one another, to do as he did and to forgive others who have hurt us.

From the cross, he said forgive them for they know not what they have done.

We are called to forgive others the things that they do to us;
we are called to go beyond just the ordinary things that we do.

We are called to love by laying our life down.

Maybe what we could do this day to imitate Christ
is to forgive one another.

All of us have some little thing;

some of us have even large things that we are called to forgive;
people who have hurt us, people who have wounded us;
even people who may not know that they have wounded and hurt us so,
we are called to lay down those hurts today.

We are called to take up Christ's self sacrificing love
and to share it with others.

Now I'm not saying it is easy but that is what we are called to do;
we are called to be kind by forgiving
and so live then in the freedom of the cross that he won for us.

So today as we come to venerate the cross,
we do not venerate it because of the wood per se,
we celebrate what he won by the wood of the cross.

What he won was our freedom for eternal life;
our freedom to forgive as we are forgiven.

Behold the wood of the cross upon which hung our Savior.

ⁱ Patricia Datchuck Sanchez, "Celebration: An Ecumenical Worship Resource," (Kansas City, Missouri: National Catholic Reporter Company, Inc., April 15, 2012).

The Victory of the Cross

As many of you know, several weeks ago,

I was at a wedding of a friend of mine in Moscow, Russia.
 While there I had the opportunity to visit lots of churches
 and they have such rich art in the Russian Orthodox tradition.
 The East and West broke off from each other in the year 1054.
 Our theologies are slightly different in certain ways
 but they are rooted in the same Jesus Christ.

One way in which their theology can be a little different
 is in their understanding and image of the cross.

In every church in the west, we are required to have
 a cross of the crucified Christ.

That is our theology.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church they have it slightly different
 and they have multiple different crosses.

One of their crosses is 8-pointed cross (shown here)

The 8 points are two extra cross bars, one on the top and one on the bottom.

The theology of this icon is very rich and helps us understand the theology.

On the top of a Western cross we have “INRI”
 referring to the Latin initials for “Jesus King of the Jews.”

In the Russian version, they have something different.

They have “ICXC” and the translation means
 “Christ the Victor of the Cross.”

The second bar on the bottom which is angled slightly up
 to the right side of Jesus’ side.

This angle is meant to symbolize the upward movement
 of the repentant thief that was on the right hand side of Jesus.

The victory of the cross was also for him

but also the condemnation of the unrepentant thief on his left hand side.

The downward movement suggests his movement towards condemnation.

In Eastern Orthodox, Christ never has a crown of thorns;
 he is always the glorified Christ.

He is always the one who looks like Jesus in the gospel today of St. John
 —the one who is always in control

—the one who offers himself up on the cross.

His life is not taken from him
 but he offers his life gloriously for the sins of all.
 There are also all sorts of other images that are really important in here.
 There is the image of the Trinity in the top cross bar
 which always shows that the power of the Trinity
 empowering Christ as he takes on this condition.

Their focus of the cross is the power and the victory of the cross
 and the western church tends to focus on the suffering of Christ on the cross.
 The reason this is important is that this Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross
 was recognized
 before we divided as a Church and it reflects more the Eastern tradition.
 So what are we glorifying?
 We do not want to glorify the suffering of the cross
 —that is not the intention of the feast day.
 The intention of the feast day was to exalt the power of the cross
 but not the cross itself but rather what happened in and through the cross.
 In a sense that goes to the Eastern Orthodox theology
 more than it does to our own.
 Ours tends to focus on the cross as the suffering Jesus
 and that has a place but it is never separated from the Resurrection of Christ.

That may seem like a subtle difference but it is a very powerful difference.
 Historically the cross was a symbol of violence, oppression and power.
 Before Christ died, Spartacus and his fellow slave soldiers,
 6,000 of them had lined the streets of Rome on crosses,
 all of whom hung deliberately and publicly naked on the crosses
 for everyone to see and to be terrified.
 The message was “You go against the Roman Empire
 —this is what happens to you!”
 There was no subtlety here!
 The cross was a very painful way to die.
 The cross was a symbol of power, violence and oppression.

What does Christ do?
 Christ embraces all of that pain;
 all of that power;
 all of that oppression.

He transforms it not by dying on the cross alone
but by rising from the dead afterwards.
That transformed this terrible symbol of power, corruption and violence
into a symbol of victory for Christians.
Christians actually used the cross as a symbol of our faith;
as the power of Christ not as the power of violence.
Because we have kind of gotten used to seeing the cross
we tend to forget the power of the cross.

We have to have a balance of the victory of the cross
and yes Christ died on the cross as well.

We have both theologies.

What does that mean for us?

It means we do not need to go looking for crosses to die on
—for those of us who have lived enough years know
that suffering and pain come our way
—we do not need to go looking for a cross to suffer on.

Crosses will come our way.

Instead we are called to embrace the suffering that comes our way
but not because of the suffering itself
but because beyond and through the cross,
we will meet the resurrected Christ.

The message that God gives to us in Christ dying on the cross
is that no matter what *God never ever leaves us alone.*

No matter how much suffering we go through,
no matter how much pain we are in,

God is always with us even to the point of death—even death on a cross.

That is a wonderfully balanced theology

but the challenge is when we start experiencing the pain ourselves.

We start to doubt the power of the cross.

We start to really wonder when you are in the midst of suffering.

It is hard to remember all this.

What is even harder than suffering ourselves
is watching a loved one suffer.

It is when a person we love is suffering,
we stand like Mary at the foot of the cross of their suffering,

helpless and powerless before their suffering
and we seem to suffer equally as much with them.
How hard it is to watch our loved ones suffer
whether it is ill health of a loved one or
whether it is the foolish decisions our loved ones make
It is so hard to watch.

Even in those moments of doubt we come together and
we choose to believe in God;
we believe that God is there even though we cannot see him;
even if we cannot even feel his presence in that painful moment
yet we choose to believe.

We come to the table to reassure each other of that message
and to recommit to believing it.
That is what today's first reading are about.
When the people prayed to take away the serpents that were killing them,
God did not take them away.
Instead he gave them an antidote.
He did not take away their suffering or the pain
he just said look upon this bronze serpent that Moses will make
and your pain will go away.

So the Lord also says that in the cross of Christ
he does not promise to take away all our suffering and pain
but he says if we look upon Christ
then we will realize that he loves us in and through the crosses of our life
and that the power of the cross will bring us to the resurrection.

So today, we come once again to the table to strengthen each other in our faith
and that no matter whether we are suffering ourselves
or whether we are watching somebody else suffer
we commit once again to believe in the power of the cross
and in the glorified cross that God will be with us no matter what
even to death, even death on a cross.

Listen to His to Gentle Voice

Most of you noticed that I have a little bit of an accent right?

Do you ever notice that when I come back from Ireland
my accent gets heavier right?

That is because I am surrounded with all those people talking funny!
It happens when my family gather at a family gathering
—our accents start to pick up again.

By the end of the night, anyone who is not a McGuire
is just like looking at these conversations
wondering which one of them is it?

So whatever we listen to we start to sound like.

That is exactly the message of the gospel today.

Whoever's voice we listen to
—the Lord wants us to listen to his voice
so we become and sound like him.

And not just sound but that we become more like Jesus.

That is of course why we have to listen to Christ more carefully.

That is why we have to find a way in our life
to listen attentively to Jesus Christ in our life.

This sounds quite easy but it requires great effort
to be attuned to the Lord's voice
because it is sometimes very soft and quiet.

If we are not, it is hard for us to hear
because there are so many other voices out there.

I will give you a metaphor that kind of helps break this open.

When I was a kid I was the youngest of 12 children,
our Dad used to come in from a day's work,
change and go out and so some work.

When he had done the work around the house
or the kitchen and the other stuff,
he would sit down and all of us—there were 10 boys!

We would look to climb up on Dad.

Now he used to love to do rub his face—his beard

—the opposite way and we'd run away from him.
We would love to do is to get up and we'd play on him right?
The poor man!
Imagine all these little kids coming up, jumping and playing on him.

Sometimes, he would be tired and
he wouldn't want us jumping up and down.
So I figured this out that if I saw him tired,
I would climb up and I would not move.
I would just like lie there.
And as I just laid there, he would hold onto me
because then none of the other brothers would get up on him
and then they wouldn't play.
I had figured this out!
Anytime that he was tired, he would just grab me
and protect himself against all the other children!

What I often noticed about this was I would climb up and lie there
and as I noticed that I would be lying on his chest,
I would be so quiet I could hear him breath
and there were times that I would listen to that almost heart beat
—and I would listen and hear
—and when he spoke it was very different.
When you are that close, you hear things that you do not normally hear.
You hear nuances that you do not often hear.
In fact, there were times when he would whisper
and no one else could hear it but me
because I was the only one that close listening right on his chest.

I believe that is a perfect image of what God wants from us.
He wants us to be so close to his heart
—to lay on his heart
—to lay on him and rest and listen carefully to his voice.
Sometimes, he just whispers.
And that whisper is just for us.
Most often the whisper says something very simple

—I love you; rest in me
—but because we are so busy jumping and playing in life,
we miss that very powerful voice that assures us that God loves us.
In the end, that is what we are called to do
because if we can hear that voice readily
—but we must be silent in prayer and pause
—no prayers, no words but just to be still;
—to be still in Christ and to listen carefully.

When we listen carefully, we will then hear his voice
and when we hear his voice,
we will become more like him.
We will begin to sound like him and in time,
we will begin to act like him.
Kindness, gentleness that is what the Lord wants from us;
to come and to listen to his voice
that he will know that we are his sheep and that he loves us.
Let us listen and rest in Christ. Listen to his voice.

Seek the Neutral Ground of Christ

In a small town called Macon in Georgia,
there are two First Baptist churches
that are separated by only 50 yards at most
—a small park sits between them.
They used to be one community; one black and one white.
The slaves in one church and the slave owners in the other.
They went to church together and they went each to their own church.
That was 180 years ago.
Unfortunately, it still persists today
—black in one and white in the other.

Two years ago, the two individual pastors were struck by a thought
that it didn't seem right and so they went out for lunch.
They meet in a neutral place and they chatted.
They came up with an idea
—that maybe they should start being one church again.

Bear in mind, two years ago the climate in America
was not much better than today when it comes to black and white
—there were all the arrests around that town
just as much as anywhere else.
So they knew what they were taking on.
They started at the best place—they started with the children.

Every year both churches had an Easter egg hunt
—each at a different time in the same park that separated them.
This year, they said, "Let's have one Easter egg hunt together."
So they did.
The kids had a blast and the parents were surprised.
Soon they had a function here and a function there
and a luncheon here and then one day, just a couple of months ago,
they went into each other's church.
Each congregation was shocked because the design inside was identical.
It was the exact same church that had been built twice.
They had never been inside each other's church in 180 years;
the same First Baptist community.

When they shared their first liturgy, each was in tears
because it had been long coming and long wanted for they,
they had no divide;
they had no ill will in their hearts against each other.
They wanted unity.
A couple of weeks ago,
they vowed together to be one church with common services.
Unity in Christ.
That is Church!

It takes a brave soul to walk into the neutral ground
to meet the other in neutral ground.
That is the bravery that only comes with conviction in Christ;
that is when we have truth on our side and
we believe that Christ wants us to be one.

Today, we celebrate the feast day of Christ the King,
King of the Universe—not just of our world.
Now more than ever, we need someone to unify us.
Unify us in civility.
Unify us in truth and life.
Unify us in holiness and grace.
Unify us in justice, love and peace.
Unify us in boldness to seek peace and reconciliation.

The two thieves we hear about in today's Gospel from the evangelist Luke
pose an interesting contrast in the last moments of their lives.
Both were convicted justly as they admit;
they were hanging for their crimes.
Even at the moment of his dying breath,
the "the bad thief," pleads his own cause
—still to the last moment dying on his cross
—he seeks only his own good.
In contrast the "good thief" in his dying moment
has a moment of conversion and
seeks only the good for Christ, the one unjustly condemned.

My friends, as long as we continue to focus on our own singular needs,
we will never, ever be united in Christ

because Christ always sought the broken,
the needy, the homeless, the elderly and the orphaned.
He is the one who gave voice to the voiceless.

If we want to be one in Christ,
we must be bold enough to walk into the neutral ground
and stake a claim for Christ our King and say
“Here is where I put my stake
—in the neutral ground that is only held by Christ.”
In that neutral ground we will strive for peace;
we will strive for reconciliation;
we will strive for love not hate;
not borders that divide us but everything that unites us in Christ.

Today as we come united to this table once more
in the receiving of the bread and the wine now his Body and Blood,
we come united,
bold to seek the neutral ground and to call Christ our King.

Epiphany—Stewardship of God's Grace

*“And they were overjoyed with seeing the Star...
and they did him homage.”*

As priests, one of the graces we have is to minister to people when they are in their most vulnerable moments through the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. And in a particular way and in a more intense way, we minister to people on their deathbed when they are asking for what we use to call “Last Rites” but it is called the Commendation of the Dying. I had an example of an epiphany for myself some time ago.

The woman I had come to see was a regular parishioner who was active in her faith. I arrived at her house, gave her the anointing of the sick. She was dying but was not yet near death. And I had a great conversation with her that day. She paused and asked me, “Father, will you please pray to God for me?” I am always a little nervous when asked about praying for others. I always say yes but I always add something. I don't want people to think that my prayers are any better than theirs. I said, “Sure. What would you like me to say to him?” And she said, “Could you just tell him that I have lived a long and happy life and I am very content. I am now tired, and I am ready to meet him. All my children have gathered around to say goodbye. And I am ready to meet him.” I said, “I think we just have said your prayer.”

She smiled and she relaxed and sat back in her bed. It was a beautiful moment. About one week later, the family called and now she was close to death and wanted a last blessing. So I gave the Prayer of Commendation of the Dying. It is a beautiful prayer and you have heard me speak of it before. “Go forward Christian soul.

Go forward to meet the maker of your soul...
And when the Lord comes out to meet you,
you will go out to meet the Lord..."

At the end of the prayer, I always ask,
"Will you tell the Lord something for me?"
She perked right up. She leaned up to me and said,
"What do you want me to say to him for you?"
She's wide awake now and totally engaged.
I said, "Could you tell him I need some help down here?"
She leaned up, eyes bright and said,
"No you don't. You have all the grace that you need.
You're doing just fine."
I responded, "Yeah. You are probably right.
I'm actually doing just fine."
I thought to myself, "don't argue with a dying lady."
And then I said, "Well in that case can you just tell him that I love him?"
And she relaxed, lay back in the bed in satisfaction and said,
"Yes. I will. That I can do."
She died a few moments later.

It was a beautiful moment and the family was there as witnesses.
I always remember that moment as it was an epiphany,
a realization of something that I guess I was aware of
but not fully aware of.
Indeed I have all the grace I need already in my life.
God has already provided for me abundantly in my life
and that while I might ask for me, I do not need anymore.

I don't know about you but for me,
often in my prayer life I ask for more and more.
And more when more is not needed.
I have all the grace in my life as it is.
What comes in prayer then is more of a realization
that I have all the grace I need for the most part.
This clear awareness that God is a very-ready presence in my life
and to ask for more would be selfish.

Today's feast is the Feast of the Epiphany;
the light to all nations;
that Christ is this light,
the foretelling of the Prophet Isaiah.
And that in the midst of our darkness,
we have a light that has shone, and that light is Christ;
that Christ is already in our lives;
that Grace is already abundantly in all of our lives,
if only we could see it.

We need to pause and to become much more aware of the Graces
that are already in our life before we start asking for more.
A lot of us are like children
who keep on asking for more and more and more,
not realizing that what they have is enough.
We too can be like those children with God
and keep on asking for more.

There is anything wrong with asking God for a healing
and prayers for blessings on others who are in need of healing.
Those are good prayers.
At some point, we ought to have a mature sense of
how well-graced we have been already
and that we are grateful to God for that grace.

There is a beautiful phrase in the second reading today
in the letter to the Ephesians from St. Paul;
that we are the stewards of God's grace;
and that we are called to be stewards of God's grace.
First of all, if we are going to be stewards of God's grace,
we have to realize how much grace we already have in our life:
our heath; our family; our friends; our job;
our entire way of being;
the gift even of our faith that we can see this.

How we then become stewards of this grace is what
we have to become aware of it;
we have to be grateful to God for it;
and then we have to use those graces for the greater glory of God;

that we do not hold onto them as if they were ours.

They are not.

They are God's gifts to us, these gifts of grace.

That is what the three Magi represent.

They offer gold, frankincense and myrrh.

A symbol that they give back to God through Christ
what he has already given to us.

We offer back to God first our awareness of the grace
that we have in our life; then gratitude;

and then the promise to use the gifts that God has given us
for the use of others and for the greater glory of God.

As we come to the table, may we recognize

at least one thing for which we are grateful;

a grace that is in our life

that we have done nothing for

but it is pure grace that we have been given.

And to offer thanks to God;

then to live out of that gratitude by offering

that grace in use and in stewardship for others for the greater glory of God.