

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Sixth Sunday of Easter (5/26), 2018

Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

A mother was helping her two sons, Kevin, age 5, and Jeff, age 3, make pancakes. The boys, needless to say, got into an argument regarding who would get the first pancake. Mom, sensing a chance to teach a morality lesson, stopped their bickering and said, "If Jesus were here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake.'" Kevin missed not a beat in responding, "Jeff, you can be Jesus."

To be on the receiving end of the Christian notion of giving is clearly the more desirable place to be. Even Kevin got that.

But Jesus' words this morning don't really give a whole lot of space to the notion of receiving...rather they have a great deal to do with giving.

He suggests that those who do not love him do not keep his word. While he did, during his ministry on earth, have some words to say about receiving...by and large, that of which he spoke was giving...giving of oneself for the good of a larger whole...for the life of the world...giving up those things and habits and manners of life that detracted from one's ability to be the creature God intended...to compromise the dignity that is ours by nature of our very creation and existence.

It is not as appealing a picture as we might like. Looked at with the cross as its focus, there is a tendency to turn away...to seek to put a gloss over what is going on.

Will Willimon, in his book, *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, writes to this effect...and I would suggest writes correctly.

The Church of today lives in an ethically debilitating climate. Where did we go wrong? Was it in the urbane self-centeredness of (Norman Vincent Peale's) *Power of Positive Thinking* and its therapeutic successors? Was it the liberal, civic-club mentality of the merits of the Social Gospel? Now we waver between evangelical TV triumphalism with its Madison Avenue values or live and let live pluralism which urges open-mindedness as the supreme virtue. And so a recent series on the "Protestant Hour" urged us to "Be Good To Yourself." This was followed by an even more innocuous series on "Christianity as Conflict Management." Whatever the Gospel means, we tell ourselves, it could not mean death. Love, divine or human, could never exact something so costly.

The cross with Christ's body upon it is what love asked...and what love gave.

If Willimon is correct. We do not want to confront that. It is too difficult. But it is exactly there that we see revealed, once and for all, the heart of God...not only that it asks us to be willing to give of ourselves in manners we can hardly imagine but that it is willing to do even more itself.

What is it each of us needs to give...give of ourselves...give for the good of a larger whole...for the good of one we hold dear...or, maybe, even not so dear? What is it?

We each know. God knows...that same God unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.

The question is whether or not we will do anything about it.

As long as we have breath in us, there is time, but we must make the first step.

Of course it's far easier, as Kevin all-too-quickly saw, to receive the gift Christ willingly gives and to ponder whether we really want to give back in like manner.

Of course it is far easier to turn away from the cross because it asks too much.

Of course it is easier not to ask ourselves what it is that has led the men and woman of our armed forces to put themselves in harm's way time and time again across a number of centuries...to hurl themselves into storms of metal and destruction for the sake of their fellow human beings...for the sake of an ideal and truths we take to be self-evident...for an experiment so fragile that it can be lost in the blink of an eye without the valor, courage, and self-giving they have demonstrated.

Such honorable living is not limited to this nation alone...though, today, we recall that most particularly. But let me tell you of a memorial that has affected me deeply since first I saw it.

In Hyde Park in Sydney, Australia sits a dignified building at one end of the park...a building created to honor the fallen soldiers of Australia in The Great War. It is approached along a wide swath of pavement and is preceded by an elegant reflecting pool. One passes the pool and ascends broad step to the entrance...a great arch opening into a room...in the middle of the room rises a waist high wall surrounding a circular opening into the level below. One approaches the opening and gradually begins to see that, within it, is stretched the naked body of a warrior...resting on a shield...legs pointing forward...arms stretched out from its sides and resting on a sword...head fallen in death. It is a vision that has reduced me to tears every time I have beheld it...and it is no coincidence, I think, that the bronze casting that so powerfully depicts the noble fallen in war is an image so much like Christ on the Cross as to take one's breath away...and could be any soldier of any land at any time.

Not all of us are asked to go to war...but, by the very nature of the promises we make at our baptisms, all of us are asked to defend much that can risk a great deal and which it is not surprising we might wish to avoid.

Yes, friends, it is far easier to turn away from that to which Christ calls us...from sacrificial living...from seeking the good of others than ourselves...from risking much for that which is honorable and good and true.

But we might well ask ourselves, especially on this day, if it is a wise course. It may well be comfortable, but, in failing to "keep (Christ's) words," do we not risk failing to find that peace he promises us...peace which often, yes, asks much...and in its absence to have only that peace which the world gives...and, all too easily, seems to take away.