

**A homily preached by the Rev. Martin L. Smith at the Church of the Transfiguration, New York, on Maunday Thursday, April 13, 2006**

Ours is a culture permeated by the language of psychology—or perhaps we should say *psychologies*, as there are so many schools and fashions. Language about the human heart and relationships has suffered the fate of religious language. Our word for these concepts flattened by overuse is psychobabble. Take the word ‘vulnerability.’ God forgive us, we have even turned this into a pop psychology commonplace. In our culture of irony, we find ourselves putting ‘air quotes’ around the word, as if to distance ourselves from a cliché.

God’s humility in the incarnation extends to submitting to the indignities of overworked language. In Holy Week we expose ourselves again to the revelation of God’s vulnerability—that our God chooses to be vulnerable to us and for us and with us. We have to step out of our protective irony and our jadedness to grasp it. We have to become vulnerable ourselves to the revelation. To have unprotected worship.

A few weeks ago I was in Virginia, and as I wandered out into the huge garden at the back of my hosts’ farmhouse I asked them what the shack was at the edge of the bluff. It was the slave cabin. Intact and unchanged from the 1850’s. They had turned it into a simple meditation chapel. The best place to meditate on Jesus’ unjoking and unjaded words about being a servant, and the hymn in Philippians about the one who was in the form of God taking on the form of a slave.

On Maunday Thursday we are confronted by the radical vulnerability of Jesus, his choice of defenselessness. As the time for words ran out, at the last supper, he did what only slaves did, got down on the floor to wash his disciples’ feet. The body language for slavery, low down where an irritable master or mistress might easily kick you in disgust if the water in your basin was too hot or too cold.

This mime of defenselessness was no mere afterthought tacked on to Jesus’ life, but his final word. John the evangelist thought it enough to tell this story, to give the meaning of the Eucharist, the last words and the last actions of Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed.

The Eucharist is the action of a man who has only one last hour to finally get across to his baffled companions what his life meant. They hadn’t gotten it. They hadn’t understood. He faced certain death and he had only an hour left, and nothing but his bare hands and the food on the supper table. What can you do with a loaf of bread and cup of wine when that is all there is to get through the defenses of these stolid and uncomprehending men? Men who right to the end had been arguing about who should get the chief positions in the new regime, one on Jesus’ right and the other on his left?

He took the bread and wine and told them to take them to be his very self. And Jesus had no ‘self-defense,’ only self-giving. Self-giving was the only self he had. So if they took the broken bread to be his broken self, and the poured-out wine as his life-blood willingly

shed, then they were receiving himself, the only self he had. In accepting his self-giving, they would receive himself.

“You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.” And they did, after the resurrection. The Eucharist after the resurrection did not celebrate Christ’s release from vulnerability to untouchable glory in a heaven far above. It celebrated his ongoing vulnerability. Paul who gives us tonight the earliest account of the Eucharist was the one who had encountered the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, a Lord who identified himself as one with the men, women and children whom Paul was harassing. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The Lord of the Church was vulnerable through his union with the defenseless ones he called his own. Not “Why are you persecuting *them*?” but “Why are you persecuting *me*?” He made no difference between them and himself. In their vulnerability, Saul now saw the ongoing vulnerability of God’s crucified Messiah in person.

In the Eucharist of the Church, Christ continues to renew his union with us, to enter our lives just as they are and make himself vulnerable to our suffering. And with this vulnerability comes openness to our joys as well. He humbles himself to make our lives extensions of his, and our experience his own. He enters our bodies sacramentally and identifies himself with them as new expressions of his body. He makes himself vulnerable to the contradictions we inflict through our unfaithfulness, not caring about his reputation as long as we continue to re-embrace his inner presence in a constant fresh beginning.

For our part, we can’t enter into this relationship, or keep on renewing it, except by continually dropping our own defenses. You can’t at one and the same time make a fortress of your own sense of self, *and* create space for Christ’s indwelling presence. To accept a vulnerable Christ as your new self, means being ready to let the old self fall apart. Paul has left us unforgettable words about this experience of letting go of the fabricated self created by the need to be as protected as possible and accepting Christ as our new self.

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:19-20)

“I have been crucified with Christ.” As we enter into the three Holy Days which explore the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection, these words starkly confront us. It is futile to merely rehearse the events of Christ’s Passion as historical happenings of long ago. It is just as fruitless merely to entertain thoughts about the Passion, juggle theological ideas or stir up pious feelings. The only thing that can admit us into its meaning is to let it happen in us. To be crucified with Christ is to be prepared to answer in a radical new way the most fundamental question we can ask ourselves. “Who am I?”

Think of all the ways we try to cobble together an answer to that question. We might answer in terms of our ancestry, our ethnicity, our job, our tastes, our sexuality, our likes

and dislikes, our history, our relationships. With greater honesty we might admit the ways we define ourselves through our resentments, our wounds, our fantasies, and the myriad ways we insist we are different from and superior to those we despise. To be crucified with Christ is to recognize that none of these things defines us, few of them have much significance, and many of them can be taken away from us, and some of them are sick.

To be crucified with Christ is to ironize them all. To put 'air quotes' round this 'I' whom we have concocted. To be a Christian is to accept a new center for myself, a new core identity which is none other than the Risen Christ himself dwelling in our hearts.

In our Eucharist today, we are re-embracing this inner presence and identity and the special meaning of Maunday Thursday is that we weigh the cost of that gift more than on any other day we celebrate Communion. It is the vulnerable, the open, the wounded Christ, whom we receive as the Risen Lord, and we cannot receive him at all without becoming vulnerable ourselves. What could be more risky than to allow Christ to be himself, within us? How thankful we are in this Eucharist that somehow, through no merit of our own, the Holy Spirit has given us the courage to take this risk.