

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Welcome to the sermon of confusion! It is Palm Sunday...also known as Passion Sunday. We cannot seem to make up our minds. Just like the crowd, we follow him...crying “Hosanna” and waving palms. And, just like the crowd, we follow him...crying “Crucify”

“Hooray for him”...over here. “Let’s kill him”...over here. This is government sanctioned execution. Leaving nothing to chance. Every detail is planned. That is still the case. Not long ago, one state released its plans to build a new corrections facility for executions. Everyone involved was to be isolated from everyone else. The witness room was to be done in light and cheerful colors. The family lounge would resemble a living room.

One prison warden had a 42-page document detailing everything. During the last five days...how everyone was to act toward the condemned person, what may or may not be said, how each action is to be carried out. At three days to go, the prisoner is moved from death row to a small building especially designed for him and what will happen to him. Before leaving death row, he is allowed one phone call. After leaving, he has no further contact with other inmates. All visitors, except his attorneys, was to be non-contact and subject to maximum security. In other words, not private.

What is the point of this? Well, an execution is not simply the fulfillment of a judicial sentence. It is a ritual. Like any ritual, it is a series of prescribed activities, in order, that have a huge significance...in this case, it is ritual of exclusion. The ultimate removal from community. Exclusion.

Today, we remember the execution ritual that is central to our faith. The passion of Jesus was an execution. Condemned and put to death. Not like in our history...by firing squad or lethal injection or electrocution. He was not put on death row, nor did he have lawyers scrambling for a pardon, but he was killed. Jesus went through the process of ultimate removal from community. Why? Because he was dangerous. Too much so. The latest of a string of these Messiah freaks who pop up every six months or so.

This reading from Luke gives details of this ritual. Some of these details apply only to Jesus. Others are standard parts of capital punishment at that time. He is mishandled by the authorities. Ridiculed by soldiers. Hated by the crowd. Forced to walk to his place of execution. Taken outside the city. Stripped of his clothes. Mocked by those surrounding him. Nailed to the beams by his wrists and feet. Lifted up on the cross. Left there to die. The ritual was carried out to its conclusion.

If done today, a doctor would be present to pronounce that Jesus was dead. No heartbeat. No vital signs. A corpse becoming cold. A successful execution. The doctor pronouncing death is part of that ritual. We still include that medical certification as part of the ritual, even in our popular culture.

I have asked you this before. How many of you have seen the movie, "Wizard of Oz?" Early in the picture, Dorothy's house is dropped out of a tornado right into Munchkin City, on top of the Wicked Witch of the East, killing her. But nothing is confirmed, nothing is settled until Meinhardt Raabe, playing the part of the dark blue clothed coroner of the Munchkins, comes forward with a scrolled-up, Certificate of Death, and pronounces, in a very officious way:

*As coroner, I must aver - I thoroughly examined her - And she's not only merely dead -
She's really, most sincerely dead!*

Now, only NOW, it is official. Only THEN does the mayor say, "Then let the joyful news be spread. The wicked witch at last is dead". And THEN the crowd...there is the crowd again...in response, starts celebrating and singing. "Ding dong the witch is dead"...and so on.

Ritual. Let us celebrate. The witch is dead. Jesus is dead.

But, in the case of Jesus, the execution is not a success. Everything official that could be done, was done...except their ritual does not exclude Jesus from the community. It does not work out as planned. There was no exclusion of Jesus from the community because Jesus returns to life. He appears to his disciples. He forgives them for their desertion, bestows peace on them, and commands them to share that peace with others. So, Jesus the excluded, Jesus the executed, becomes the center for a new community, a new humanity.

Now, there is a new community stronger than death, one that will continue forever. Humanity is reborn, set free from the slavery to violence and counter-violence, from the bondage of domination and the need to think or act that I am better than the guy next to me. Humanity can start to experience the reign of the peace of God.

The reign of God is not yet fully established among us. But whenever the church is true to itself, it is a sign of that reign, a portion of that new humanity. Whenever the church glimmers with light, it is the light of this reign. As the church, we are born out of the death of Jesus, and we gather around the living Jesus.

Instead of execution, the Holy Eucharist is our ritual. It does not deal death, but gives life. It is the Holy Eucharist, which keeps reconstituting the church as Jesus active in this world, alive with his indestructible life.

But still, like the people in the passion story, we fall way, way short in recognizing Jesus and responding to him. Over and over, we play the same fatal game. We desert him in the hour of crisis. We crucify him one more time. We dishonor him through the contempt we feel for ourselves and for others. We exclude him from community in the person of his brothers and sisters.

In these and so many other ways, we put him to death, over and over again. And what a waste! What a waste of time, of resources, of mis-direction...what a waste of our lives....because, over and over again, this continuing execution is never successful. Our sins are stronger than we are, but they are not stronger than

divine life. Even though crucified by us, Jesus always returns.

Bestows peace. Establishes his new community, and invites us...even us...to participate.

By our sins, we break his body and shed his blood. But what does he do?

He makes himself food and drink!

We abandon him to death. He leads us to life.

We exclude him. He welcomes us.

It never ends, and we cannot beat it. Honestly...how is he NOT the Son of God?

We started today shouting our Hosannas. But all the while continuing down the path into the holy city, we are always in execution mode...killing Jesus ourselves, over and over, and hiding from the truth of it. In the taking of the offering today, you will also receive a large nail. Keep it with you this Holy Week. Carry it with you. Just as Jesus commands us to take the bread and wine in remembrance of him, so should we also take the nail this week in remembrance of the ways that we continue to try to abandon him, try to exclude him. Reminding us that we, also, keep hammering that nail into the cross.

But he goes ahead of us openly, carrying that cross, opening declaring who he..and we..are by our lives and actions.

Is this a heartless execution, or something more?

In the bread broken and wine shared, and with the cross as our symbol, may God help us to recognize the depths of our foolish wisdom and answer a call for us to live... not by achievement, but by sacrifice which manifests the power of God.

May we be always ready to give up what we cannot keep, in order to gain what we cannot lose...in the Name of God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.