

July 21, 2019
Christ & Grace, Petersburg
6th Pentecost (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Let me tell you a story. A few years ago I was leading a Holy Land pilgrimage, much like the one I will lead next February for the diocese. We were about two-thirds of the way through the pilgrimage. Our early afternoon stop was on the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. You may remember that on the night before Jesus died upon the cross and just after the Upper Room Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus left Jerusalem, walked across the Kidron Valley and spent the night in the Garden of Gethsemane in prayer. Today right in the center of the Garden is a church: the Basilica of the Lord's Agony. Having a little spare time, several of us entered the church. The only seats that day were on benches alongside the outer walls of the church. In the center of the worship space was the altar, surrounded by an altar rail with kneelers. As I dropped my backpack and sat down on the bench on the outer periphery of the church I became very uncomfortable. I fought with my uncomfortableness and tried to settle into my seat, but I couldn't do it. After about 10 minutes of being uncomfortable I began to sense that I should get up and move to one of the kneelers around the altar. You should know that to talk real time with what I knew to be God was quite unusual for me.

Yet, I picked up my backpack, walked up to the freestanding altar in the center of this large and semi-darkened church, and knelt down. It was really strangely surreal for me. I just knelt and kept quiet – for about 10 more minutes or so I just knelt and kept quiet. Gradually I started turning over the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane that night. Three times Jesus prayed to his Heavenly Father to let him live his life in such a way that it didn't include being crucified upon a cross. Three times in his prayers the answer came back to Jesus: NO. Just then it dawned upon me what was happening that night over two thousand years ago. Jesus had an idea – a plan – about how his life was to be lived out – and that way of life and living did not involve being killed on a cross. The Bible records that three times Jesus tried to get his father to relieve him of having to go to the cross. Three times the answer was “no.” Finally, the Bible states that Jesus said, not my will, but your will be done. As Jesus said “yes” to the cross, he was saying “no” to the more comfortable, and perhaps familiar way he thought his life could be lived out.

In saying “yes” to the cross, a painful act that surely he knew that would cause him to lose his life, Jesus made the most difficult decision that anyone would ever have to make. By saying “yes” that night in the garden Jesus showed that he was willing to sacrifice his life and life plans to carry out his father's plan to have him sacrifice his life on the cross.

The willingness to sacrifice your life and plans – which frequently is to sacrifice the familiar and the comfortable – for God's calling upon your life is the difference between having some vague affection for a nice set of concepts about Jesus to saying that you trust Jesus with your life.

In a few minutes when you renew your Baptismal Covenant and say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord," you will be saying that you agree to be a sacrificial follower of Jesus Christ. You are saying, among many other things, that you are willing to give up your way for God's way.

One day Jesus came to visit with two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha was the sister who knew how Middle Eastern hospitality was to be carried out. When Jesus came into their home Martha was busy making the meal, which she knew was required for proper traditional hospitality. As Martha banged around in the kitchen with her pots and pans, she began to ask herself, "Where is my sister, Mary? Mary should be in the kitchen helping me. This is our way of hospitality. Surely she understands that this is who we are. This is always the way we have greeted guests in the house. Instead she is at the feet of our guest being mesmerized by his talk, and I am in the kitchen doing all the work!"

When Martha had enough of being the put-upon and burdened sister, she went to Jesus with her complaint about Mary – presumably with Mary hearing every word she spoke. You've seen this before, perhaps in your own family. When someone has had all he or she can take that person blurts out their complaint. With Martha, this is the way she exploded with her words to Jesus: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."¹

And you know what, this sounds pretty reasonable to me. Martha's point is well taken. Which one of us hasn't been where Martha is. She is upholding the tradition of hospitality and trying to maintain the traditions of the family. She is the one who is invested in insuring that the family can be what it has always been. Her sister Mary is the one who does not appreciate this. Someone has to get it put back right.

To Martha's impassioned plea, Jesus in fact says that he doesn't care. Jesus is about a new way of being in relationships and about a new way of faith. Jesus' response to Martha the hard working traditionalist, a response that may seem to be abrupt and cold to some of us, was, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."²

Martha, says Jesus, time is of the essence; the time has come for you to sacrifice even your most cherished traditions. Jesus is telling Martha that he is starting a new way of being in relationship with God and God's people, and Martha's sister Mary is beginning to invest herself in that new way of being. It isn't that tradition and hard work is unimportant, because it is. However, Jesus is opening up a new way of being in relationship to God, a new way of belief and faith, and Mary who sits at his feet is the one who gets it.

¹ Luke 10:38-42, NRSV

² Ibid.

Jesus' new way is a way of being willing to sacrifice even your most cherished ways and traditions – for the urgent sake of the dawning Kingdom of God. For the Jewish person in Jesus' day this was unthinkable. To this the Jews would say that they have been the faithful ones who have maintained their traditions since almost the beginning of recorded time. Generations and generations of Jews have believed in those sacred traditions. Jesus, are you telling us to sacrifice that? To which question Jesus is saying, yes.

You might say that this is a bit risky. What if I get to a crossroads when following Jesus? Will this mean that I have to give up something or even someone that I really like in order to be a follower of Jesus? If you are asking that kind of question, you are asking the right question. Being a sacrificial follower of Jesus can be costly, particularly when you don't know what the outcome is going to be; particularly when the outcome makes you uncomfortable and takes you outside of your protective bubble of familiarity.

Fifty years ago yesterday — July 20, 1969 — astronaut Neil Armstrong descended the ladder of the Apollo 11 lunar lander and set foot on the surface of the moon. This was an incredibly risky venture. Before the historic flight of Apollo 11, Neil Armstrong's brother Dean asked him, "What single thing do you have the most uncertainty about?"³

Neil Armstrong's reply was, "How deep is the dust?"⁴ The dust? The scientists knew a lot about the Apollo 11 moon launch, but they didn't know anything about the gray powdery dust on the surface of the moon. So when the lunar lander touched down in the Sea of Tranquility, they were not absolutely certain that the legs of the lander would not mire up or sink into the dust. Before Armstrong's step off the ladder onto the moon's surface, the real risk was to have a safe landing.

The scientists and crew had to sacrifice their fears and trust what their best knowledge and wisdom told them to do. They did, and the rest is, as we say, history.

At times as a follower of Jesus you don't have absolute certainty that everything will work out according to your plans. If you could have absolute certainty you would not have to trust.

Many of us believe that the Church of Jesus Christ is at a decision point at which we are going to have to choose who we are and who we will be as we live into the future. In fact, the decision is more stark than that. We are going to have to decide if we are going to have a future. Are we going to be the way we have always been and stay in our area of comfort and familiarity, or are we going to allow to risk our future with Jesus.

³ <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv-programme/e/tgy5y/neil-armstrong---first-man-on-the-moon/> Accessed 7/19/2019.

⁴ Ibid.

Last Friday we had 104 congregations in the Diocese of Southern Virginia. By next Friday we will have only 102 congregations in this diocese.

Yesterday morning I was at St. Paul's, Newport News, a congregation with 139 years of remarkable history. At St. Paul's we celebrated the final service of Holy Eucharist and then I proceeded to deconsecrate the church. It was an incredibly sad service for the over 100 people who were in attendance. Also, it was an incredibly difficult decision for us to make with the rector and vestry of St. Paul's that they could no longer maintain themselves in the manner they had for the last 139 years.

Next Thursday evening at St. Mark's Church in Hampton we will have a similar service of a final Holy Eucharist and a deconsecration of their church. Their leaders also are aware that they cannot maintain St. Mark's in the ways they have in the past.

Beyond measure these events are filled with grief and loss for God's people. Yet, I have faith that as we sacrifice the old way of being, that God is doing a new thing in Hampton and Newport News, and perhaps even in Petersburg.

On Saturday at St. Andrew's, Newport News we are having a Fresh Expressions Visioning Conference. The title of the visioning conference is "Deep Roots, Wild Branches." In the presence of two highly capable facilitators, one from the Church of England and one from the United Methodist Church in this country, we will explore how we can participate in the new way of Jesus. The allusion to "Deep Roots" signifies that we are aware of and invested in our faith and belief in our Lord Jesus as both our anchor and guiding light. Yet at the same time, we are open to the "Wild Branches" as a way of finding new ways of being the body of Christ in new ways with perhaps persons who have never had the opportunity to bond with Christ.

In our emerging culture the choice is rather stark. Will we be Martha and cling to the past and the ways of old? Or will we be a Mary who hears Jesus out to see if there is spark of light for a new way?

In a few moments you and I are going to have the opportunity to renew our baptismal covenant. In so doing we will affirm our deep roots with faith in Jesus Christ. What we are going to state is more than the fact that we have a vague affection for Jesus and that we want to enjoy the social connections of being a Christian congregation. The essence of the renewal of baptismal vows is that we are putting our faith and our trust in Jesus: his redeeming work on the cross, his presence in our Christian community and our life with him into eternity. This type of trust – particularly today – is a risk. It is a type of trust intimating that we will be willing to sacrifice anything that stands in the way of an exclusive relationship with Jesus as Lord. I believe that today, more so than at any time in my life, this commitment of trust is calling us to a new way of being. I wish I had a road map to know what this new way looks like, but I don't. However, I trust that our Lord Jesus will make us into what we need to be and take us where we need to go.

In preparation for the renewal of our vows, we are going to observe a period of reflective silence to allow for God's Holy Spirit to prepare our hearts and minds for the important step of faith we are about to take.