



“Born To Live”

a sermon by

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Our text is John 12:37-50. It comes on the heels of our passage this past Wednesday- in the same conversation that Jesus was having with his disciples about how his hour had come and the Son of man would be lifted up, and how in this hour his prayer was not, 'take this cup from me', but 'father, glorify your name.' "Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn- and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God. Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me." This is not often the Word that we think of when we think about the messages of Lent, "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world...I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life."

In a season that is supposed to be about committing to and cultivating spiritual discipline as a means of purging away the excesses within ourselves to better prepare us for the cross, Jesus not judging disobedience doesn't exactly help our cause. The last thing that I seem to need is a standard that is more lax for myself, I struggle with my own discipline enough as it is. But here is Jesus saying that he did not come to judge but to save. That he has brought a Word from his father to us, and that Word is life. Not law. Not even obedience. Just eternal life. Once again the gospel writer John is putting before us the question of faith and life. Namely, do we have faith, and if so, what does that mean for life? The quotes from Isaiah, as difficult to decipher as they are, are essentially an answer to an unspoken question of the author's which is why did Jesus' own- the Jews- not believe?

The answer, Isaiah suggests, is that God hardened their hearts for the sake of a later, greater display of salvation and glory. But then there were those who did believe but who did not confess. They had faith in Jesus, but that faith had no implication on them for all sorts of reasons, namely because they didn't want to shake up their lives. "They feared that they would be put out of the synagogue. For they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God." John says. Interesting, I think, that the fear of change and expulsion from the synagogue is tied up with a thirst for glory.

The synagogue was not necessarily an easy place to be in. There was a strict law to abide by. Rules of temple purity to be reinforced. It was a disciplined life- the only religious life the authorities would have known. So it makes sense that they would fear losing that life. And yet on the same token, Jesus says, their own need for glory was wrapped up in their desire to keep that life secure.

It felt good to be righteous. It felt good to be regarded with high esteem. So based on what we know that Jesus is offering, what does that mean for us? How exactly are we to understand the call of faith and how are we to conduct our lives with a Christ who comes to share that his life and job is about spreading salvation, light, and eternal life in light of very real religious and social expectations to which we are accustomed? And very reasonable ways of doing things that we don't want to give up? Quite simply, what does the Lord require of us?

Just this past January I had the opportunity to spend 10 days at St. Benedict's monastery in Snowmass, Colorado for an intensive retreat on Centering Prayer. The monastery is situated in a basin that is surrounded by incredible, jagged, snow covered mountains that tower above you on every side, cutting into a perpetual, pristine bright blue sky.

When I arrived I immediately thought of my former colleague here David Green who was from West Texas and likely would have looked around and said, 'ah, the suffering we do for Jesus.'

But one of the components of the experience were daily conferences either by video or in person led by Fr. Thomas Keating. Thomas is a monk at St. Benedict's who for many many years was responsible for the order there but is now in his late 80s and dedicates his energy to teaching centering prayer all over the world.

Well in one of our conferences Thomas shared that, maturing through his own role in this religious order he'd had his own evolution of ideas about the call of the spiritual life.

The monastery there is a Trappist monastery, which is a vein of monastic order long known to be among the most rigid in their disciplines, which Thomas loved as it made him feel particularly holy to be in this most especially disciplined and holy place.

For them, particularly prior to Vatican II during which Thomas himself was coming through the ranks, to have a rich spiritual life meant an impoverished physical life of sorts- a denial of creature comforts such as cushions on seats or backs on chairs or salt in soup- these sacrifices were an essential part of their daily discipline- pushing them to fix their minds only on Christ.

One could only stand or kneel for the hours of prayer that they did a day, you could not sit. Songs were sung without accompaniment, living quarters furnished only with the barest of necessities.

Well, Thomas said, he himself was among the most zealous in reinforcing this notion of self deprivation of any creaturely pleasures or extravagances and pursued the Trappist ideal with fervor. It gave him a little sinful pleasure, admits, to know that they were doing things better than everyone else.

And he remained deeply committed as he became Abbot in charge of the monetary, to reinforce that ideal unflinchingly with the other brothers. Thomas said, 'I entered into the Trappist order because of their discipline, and I was going to be the most disciplined monk of the most disciplined order in order to be the most pleasing unto God and saw it as my responsibility to ensure others did the same.'

Well, one day a young novice monk named Bernie came to join the monastery. And Bernie, as Thomas describes was absolutely in love with life. Filled with joy and smiles Bernie had a very different view of what the Lord required of the Trappists.

He certainly was on board with their disciplines but he just could not understand why everything had to be so drab. Perhaps because he was in charge or perhaps because he would be so unmoved Thomas said that Bernie took a liking to him instantly which of course was a source of great concern to Thomas, who was deeply committed to this path of depravity.

And, much to Thomas' chagrin, Bernie seemed intent on brightening up his life. "I would walk into my very simple office and there on my desk would be a jar with wildflowers that Bernie had put there- none of the other monks would dream of bringing such excesses into the monastery- and I would take the flowers and throw them away" Thomas said.

Nobody loved the beauty of that place more than Bernie, who would spend any moment of free time walking on the mountains breathing in the air, or contemplating for an hour a single flower.

On the property was an old barn that Bernie as part of his work detail was commissioned to restore and upfit for a living and working space for some of the monks. After months of effort repairing the roof and leveling the floors, Bernie was finally finished and solicited the help of two of the administrators of the monastery to put on a few final touches.

Well, when Thomas, being in charge, came to survey the work much to his horror he found that Bernie had hung a few modest window dressings, placed a rug on the floor, and put some glass trinkets that caught and reflected the light on the window sill, even- excesses! Thomas said.

And one day shortly thereafter when Bernie was out, Thomas recruited the help of a few other brothers and they took down the window dressings, rolled up the carpet, boxed up the trinkets and removed all the mountain wildflowers that had, by then, cropped up in jars on a few of the tables.

When Bernie returned he was heartbroken. He just couldn't understand but Thomas, unwaivering in his resolve, patiently explained the Trappist commitments and remained unmoved.

Well, after Vatican II when the Catholic church began to reevaluate some of their ways in light of the modern world, Bernie was convinced that the monastery was finally going to catch up to him. It started modestly, Thomas recalled.

Music was permitted during worship after a great deal of debate and discussion and Bernie was the only musician among the brothers. Only the most modest accompaniment to songs would be allowed on the piano. But slowly, over many months, Thomas started noticing a few unnecessary notes creeping in. A few trills or a flourish at the end of a stanza which met with Thomas' disapproval, of course, but he didn't say anything.

Finally, after literally years of Bernie pleading, the brothers determined that ice cream would be served after their meals of celebration for the most holy days. And Thomas recalls that while the other brothers, all good Trappists, would permit themselves only a single, modest scoop of vanilla, Bernie would pile mounds of ice cream into his bowl- vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry,

sit at the table with the other brothers and with a slow, grand flourish, slurp and indulge every single spoonful taunting the older aesthetics around him. after all if you were allowed a pleasure, why not enjoy it?

Bernie became the chef and spent hours transcribing recipes and the meals for the first time in the life of the monastery themselves became sources of celebration. Each day, Thomas said, he would find in his office little presents that Bernie, still intent on winning his favor would leave- a prayerbook, a few flowers by his Bible. Only now Thomas began to leave them there, and even take some enjoyment out of them.

Bernie petitioned for a television, hotly contested as you might imagine, but prevailed so that now, on Friday evenings, the brothers would gather after a week of hard work and watch National Geographic specials about nature and documentaries on travel.

Soon it came time for the monastery to hold an anniversary celebration that the whole community of Snowmass would be invited to (the residents there worship with the brothers there on Sunday mornings now) and Bernie was elated to be designated the leader of special music and he insisted on practicing in secret so that it would be a surprise for all. One day prior to the celebration, Thomas said, Bernie was out for a walk on his beloved mountain when he had a massive heart attack and died on the spot...

Later that day, Thomas recalls, they found in his cell an audio tape that Bernie had made of himself on the piano so that he could practice for the event. And after a minute of vaudevillian playing around at the beginning of the tape the opening song for the celebration came across the grainy recording. Thomas recognized it instantly- it was his own favorite song- one of the rare confessions that he had once made to Bernie once years prior about his own affection for the sacred music of this world but that had not been mentioned since. He was floored. And returned to his office where wildflowers sat waiting there.

“It was like a gift from beyond the grave,” Thomas said now with tears streaming down his cheeks. “And in that moment I suddenly realized what Bernie had known all along by the way he lived life so genuinely and consented to its end so fully. It was a realization that caused us to name the mountain after him.

That the essence of the spiritual life is not to love life less, but to love it passionately. And be willing to give it up at a moment’s notice when God asks.” Amen.