



CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

The Third Sunday after Pentecost

I like you exactly as you are

The Very Rev. Michael Sniffen, Dean

Let me just put my “Justify” pin on here...[attaches “Justify” pin to stole]

Justify! Justify has won the triple crown! There is a certain reverence for horse racing here, being so close to Belmont - and I like that Justify’s name has religious significance. Justification is something theologians have spent a few minutes thinking about. And we all want to be Justified, don’t we? Made righteous in the sight of God.

Well, Justify won the triple crown, but Jesus Christ won the crown that fadeth not away and has justified us all - and that’s the Truth.

This past week, I was asked to offer a prayer for the jockeys who would race in the Belmont Stakes. It’s a very dangerous sport. And after I offered the prayer, I had a chance to speak for a few minutes with Mike Smith, who rides Justify. Mike told me that Justify is an old soul. That he’s comfortable in his skin. That he’s so relaxed before a race, you worry if he’ll even run. As I listened to him speak, I thought - wow, I wish I were like that. How about you?

Certainly, being so at ease in himself is part of what makes Justify exceptional. It’s a quality and an experience that is rare for horses and humans. Many, if not most of us, feel a general sense of dis-ease born of pain in our souls that we carry with us all the time.

This week, we heard the sad news of the deaths of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain: two people who to outward appearances had it all. The founder of a worldwide fashion brand, and a man who traveled the world cooking, eating and making friends. But what is clear now is that these were two human beings who shared our pain. No matter how successful one is with regard to career, achievement of wealth, accomplishment or notoriety, the challenges and the pain of being human cannot be avoided. The spiritual and emotional suffering that accompanies simply living in this world does not discriminate, and there is no way to pay the pain away.

In the reading from Genesis today, God calls to a man in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. 'Where are you?' he asks. And the reply comes, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' We know the story. There is a reason this exchange is included in our foundation story about the human experience. Adam was in pain.

How often have we felt naked and vulnerable and hidden ourselves? Fear, anxiety and shame can keep us from the help and the relationships we need to live. How often have we found ourselves alienated from God, from one another and from ourselves, due to the pain we experience inside? Maybe you find yourself there today.

Feelings of shame, fear and disconnection are powerful motivators. They can drive us deeper into places we are not intended to dwell - and they can warp our perceptions in ways that compound our suffering.

There are many reasons that people end their own lives. Underneath many of them is a spiritual condition of feeling like a burden to others. When we feel this way, we look to God and see judgment rather than love. We look around and see people who won't accept us rather than people struggling for acceptance themselves. We look in the mirror and see imperfection, rather than a reflection of the divine image.

But those perceptions are not accurate. They are warped by our pain. You are not a burden. You are loved. You are beautiful and you matter. Your life is not a burden to others, it is a blessing.

One of the things that can really help when we are in pain is prayer. And I don't mean that in some sentimental way. It can feel almost impossible to pray when we feel like a burden. Psalm 130 reminds us that prayer coming from that deep place of brokenness is most authentic.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!

This is serious prayer. A calling out from despair to be truly heard. The rest of the psalm is a wonderful song of forgiveness and redemption worthy of meditation. Prayers from a place of vulnerability and fear are uniquely powerful and God has promised never to reject a broken heart.

Jesus had his own human experiences of vulnerability, anxiety and rejection. We heard one of them this morning in the Gospel of Mark. A story of Christ's solidarity with those who feel alone.

Following several stories of healing, Jesus names the apostles and sends them out to proclaim his message of love. But as he goes home, a crowd gathers together and overwhelms him and his friends in such a way that they cannot eat. Maybe you've had that experience of being so overwhelmed that it's impossible to eat. And we hear that his family is coming, thank goodness, so maybe they will support him through this. But, no. His family joins the crowd in thinking he's gone out of his mind, and they attempt to restrain him. Talk about a pile on.

Isn't it painful when the very people we expect to love us unconditionally look at us sideways? It's heartbreaking. It causes Jesus to teach them about how things are to be done in his kingdom. To paraphrase, he says - my kingdom is about bringing people together, not separating them. It's about accepting them not rejecting them. My kingdom is about love. We won't fight evil with evil. We won't fight fire with fire. We won't take an eye for an eye. Instead, we will fight rejection with acceptance. We will fight suffering with healing. We will fight despair with hope and we will fight violence with the cross.

Sometimes we can't see how beloved we are. For all sorts of reasons that are not our fault. It's how the world is. When we can't see our belovedness, it is not because we are somehow deficient or are doing life in the wrong way. It is most often because our pain has simply overwhelmed us. This is a common part of the human experience. A part of the human experience Jesus knew well.

This weekend, a documentary about Mr. Rogers opened called "Won't you be my neighbor?" Many of us grew up with Mr. Rogers or raised our children with Mr. Rogers. I remember the way he used to end his show by saying, "You make each day a special day. You know how? By just your being you. There's only one person in this whole world like you. And I like you exactly as you are." I like you just the way you are.

You are loved. You are beautiful. Your life is meaningful. And in this community of acceptance and forgiveness, you are not alone. Life can feel like a race or a competition -something that can be won or lost. But that's not right. You don't have to do anything to justify your life. God in Christ has already done that by the power of the Holy Spirit. And you are perfect exactly as you are.