

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 5th Sunday of Lent, April 7, 2019.

Our lessons today remind us that whatever love we are feeling for Jesus is a result of Jesus loving us. From the Epistle to the Philippians (**Philippians 3:4b-14**): “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

The Season of Lent, which is nearing a conclusion, is really a time of giving thanks for the sacrifice that Jesus will make on our behalf. Every sacrifice that we have made this Season is in response to the sacrifice that we know Jesus will make less than a week after entering Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna. If Jesus can die for us, surely we can give up some things that we probably don't need and take on other things that we probably do need. A holy Lent is well within our capability.

This transaction seems pretty straight-forward, but executing our half of the transaction is not a slam dunk. Lots of us have trouble with our half. Why is that? Well, here are a couple of reasons why we might be slow in responding.

One is that we might not be convinced that the crucifixion – the Jesus half of the transaction – really had cosmic implications. Maybe Jesus simply deserved to die. Maybe he wanted to die. Maybe, rather than being the Son of God and Savior of the World, he was delusional. We weren't there. How can we trust this Story? Do we owe him anything, much less sacrifice?

Another reason might be that we simply feel inadequate. If Jesus really is the Son of God, and, as such, really is the Savior of the World, and submitted to the agony of the Cross to make this point, how can I, little old me, ever say thank you enough?

Sounds like a no-win situation for us. We're not sure if the Crucifixion is all that is claimed, or, if it is, do we really deserve that kind of profound love?

Here is God's answer. Very simple. “It's my call, not yours.”

“I, not you, will decide what the significance of the Crucifixion is, and I will decide whether I want to share this significance, this profound Forgiveness, this

incredible Second Chance. And here's the call. The sacrifice of Jesus is for real. And the resurrection of Jesus is for real. And my continued support for you, in and through the Holy Spirit, is for real. It's all for you. The only thing you have to do is say 'Thank you, Lord,' and make adjustments in your life that reflect this Divine Forgiveness. I can make the call. I can save you and the whole world and all of history and all of the future. But it won't make a difference to you if you do not at least acknowledge the call. Belief in the call might take some time – I understand that – but don't give up on the call without at least honoring it and recognizing that when it comes to Salvation, it's not your call, it's mine.

From the Prophet Isaiah (**Isaiah 43:16-21**): "Thus says the Lord, 'Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'"

This is the God's call. He could have left the Hebrews to their own devices, but God never gave up on them. His hopes were always high. "The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."

Guess what? You and I are the Hebrews. God could leave us to our own devices, which are problematic at best and disastrous at worst, but He makes a different call.

It is the call that St. Paul speaks of to the Philippians. He describes life before God's call as "rubbish," and he contrasts "a righteousness of my own that comes from the law" with a "righteousness from God based on faith in Christ."

Paul drives home his point: "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

The "call of God in Christ Jesus." Not your call. Not my call. The call of God. And thank God, it's a great call. It's a hallelujah call. It's why we're here. It was a close call at home, to be sure. It looks that Jesus would not only die, but stay dead. But, on the third day, the great Umpire in the Sky called Jesus Safe.

I love baseball, I have played a little bit. And I have coached a little bit. And I have officiated a little bit. Some of the changes in the game I like, and others I worry about. One of the changes I worry about – not just in baseball, but in every sport, and increasingly in every facet of our lives – is instant replay. The goal is to get the call right. I get that. But in that process, as admirable as the intent is, we have undermined the authority of the official, be it an umpire or police officer or parent or driver. We are getting to the point when we don't respect officials who make calls, using just their judgment. That judgment must be ratified by instant replay.

One of the most interesting figures at a baseball game is the home-plate umpire, the one who calls balls and strikes. So far, calling balls and strikes has not been replaced by technology. But it will be. That rectangle showing the strike zone, which we see on television on every pitch, is not the final authority yet, but you can be sure that someone is working on that application right now.

Well, as technology makes inroads in sports, we can hope that technology does not make inroads in theology. I don't want God to be second-guessed. I don't want the authority of God to be compromised in any way. When God makes a call, I want that call to stand. When God said, in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, that He loves us despite our shortcomings, I want that call to stand. And when God gives you and me the freedom to accept the call of Salvation or not, I want that freedom to stand. And, if we say "No thanks" to God, we at least own that decision. But, if we say, "Thank you, Lord," we do more than own a decision. We experience the love of the Creator of the Universe in a manner like no other.

Today's lesson from the Gospel of John (**John 12:1-8**) tells of a very interesting call that Jesus makes. Actually there are several calls in this lesson. Mary makes a call. She anoints Jesus with a costly perfume and works the perfume into the feet of Jesus with her hair. Then Judas makes a call. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" He makes a call, but misses the point. Then Jesus makes a call: "Leave her alone ... You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Instant replay might have insisted that the costly perfume be somehow returned to its container, therefore negating the call of Mary and the call of Jesus. And

who knows how instant replay would have handled the empty tomb. It certainly would have captured the Crucifixion, but would it have captured the Resurrection and the risen Christ putting his hand in the side of a doubting Thomas?

We don't know, do we? We have to make up our own mind. When it comes to faith, we are the official. We make a call for ourselves, but we don't make the big Call, the Call that God has made. Which is that His Call is the one that counts.

And, again, what is that Call? Simple but powerful. From **Psalm 126**: "Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering the sheaves." Or, as God, the Home Plate Umpire, would call: "You're safe!"

Amen.