

Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent
Day 33: Letting Go

For Reflection: I envy Esther Williams, the aquatic movie star of the 1940s and 50s. It's not her stardom I envy; it's not the way she looked in a bathing suit I envy. It's the way she executed her swan dives without fear. The way she explored the wonders of the deep with nothing but joy. Me, I'm a scaredy-cat. I can't ski because so I'm afraid of falling that I do – all the time. I've failed scuba classes – twice. I once forced a roller-coaster operator to stop the ride because my screams were so (genuinely) terrified.

Fear has kept me from a lot of enjoyment in my life: exploring amusement parks and the ocean floor and winter mountains. And I have a feeling fear has kept me from some spiritual growth as well: fear of forgiveness (what might forgiving lead me to?); fear of regular prayer (what if I actually start hearing something that scares me?); fear of giving more generously of my time and resources (will I have enough for me and my family?).

Life, especially life in Christ, seems to require a lot of letting go. Over and over again. I'm hoping I can gain some courage in letting go in the liturgy and stories that lead us to Easter. I think of Mary, letting go of her son as he dies on the cross. Of the disciples, losing their friend whose ministry gave their lives meaning in a muddle of chaos and confusion. And mostly of Christ Himself, letting go of his earthly life for the sake of our eternal ones. And it strikes me that every player in Christ's passion, especially Christ Himself, lived life without fear, but with an Esther Williams' like wonder and joy in exploring it.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** Think of the story we'll enter into between Palm Sunday and Easter. Reread Matthew 26-28, Mark 14-16, Luke 22-24 or John 12-20, or rent a movie that helps you remember. The Last Temptation of Christ is one of my favorites. Whose story –Mary's, Judas', Peter's, Jesus' -- most helps you let go of that which hinders your life, and your spiritual growth? Pray that his or her story will inspire your own unfolding story.*

Saturday of the Fifth Week of Lent
Day 34: Unceasing Prayer

***For Reflection:** Bishop Katharine's story of the Family Center bringing God's kingdom on earth in southern Washington State reminds me of a ministry in upstate New York that began by offering brown-bag lunches to the hungry and now nourishes in a larger way. It started with a remarkable woman called Addie. "When I struck up conversations with parents and children, I was struck that 'college' wasn't in their vocabulary. When I'd bring it up, they'd always respond that they couldn't afford college. When encouraged them to check with their high school guidance counselor, I learned that only a few of the kids and virtually none of the parents even knew their counselor's name-- not hard to understand because the local public high school has over 3000 students." So Addie, who grew up in Nigeria and came to the United States to attend college, began looking for ways to nourish self-esteem. "The base problem," she insists, "is really a problem of empowerment." These days, under Addie's direction, middle and high school students get tutoring from college students so they can pass college prep classes and do well on the SAT. Parents get help filling out financial aid*

forms. “It’s frustrating sometimes,” Addie admits, “but we volunteers are a strong community for each other as well as for the guests.

Not too long ago, I was feeling really discouraged, because some of the kids and families we try to help simply stop coming, and we don’t see them again. But when I was at my son’s graduation from middle school, out of nowhere, a young man gave me a huge hug and said, ‘Hey guess what? I’m a freshman at Morgan State! Thank you for helping me get there.’ He was there that night for his sister’s middle-school graduation, and he had this advice for the little girl: ‘You make sure you let this lady and her friends help you, and you can go to college too.’ So that keeps me making sandwiches every Tuesday and doing everything I can to get kids empowered so someday, there won’t be any need for anybody to make sandwiches for the hungry.”

Suggestion for Prayer: Addie inspires me to pray unceasingly for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Who inspires you? Say a prayer of thanksgiving for them today. Ask God to show you what you need to do to help further his kingdom.

Monday of Holy Week
Day 35: Paying Attention

For Reflection: Bishop Katharine’s mention of Benedict of Nursia got me thinking about him. He was the monk of the late fifth and early sixth centuries whose rules were adopted by the majority of European medieval monasteries, earning him the nickname “founder of Christian monasticism.” While you’ve likely heard of Benedict, and the “Benedictine Rule,” used even now in most brothers’ and sisters’ orders in

Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant traditions throughout Europe and the U.S., you may not have heard of his twin sister Scholastica.

Since they were considered their father's property, medieval daughters were expected to take a back seat to sons -- which explains why the story of Scholastica (c. 480 – 543) denying her brother has been remembered. Born in what is now Italy, Scholastica founded and led a religious community about five miles from Benedict's abbey of Monte Cassino, practically in her brother's shadow.

Tradition has it that once a year, Benedict visited his sister. In 543, as their day together drew to a close, Scholastica asked Benedict to stay past supper. He refused, so Scholastica prayed silently to prevent him from leaving. Almost immediately, a storm blew up. When shocked Benedict asked, "What have you done?" Scholastica replied, "I asked you and you would not listen; so I asked my God and He *did* listen. So now go off, if you can, leave me and return to your monastery." With the storm raging, he couldn't, so their visit continued. St. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), who wrote this story in his biography of Benedict comments, "She could do more because she loved more." And just a few days after Benedict returned home, he had a vision of his his sister's soul leaving the earth.

There's an interesting postscript to the story of this brother and his overshadowed sister. On Scholastica's feast day in 1978, workers uncovered a 14th-century fresco of Scholastica. The 15th-century fresco covering it was beyond repair. The subject of the crumbling fresco? You guessed it: Benedict.

It's a shame that we look back on Benedict as someone who always had the answers. As Bishop Katharine points out, he also taught us to "listen with the ear of our

hearts,” which means that he, too had to “tune out to tune in” as we might put it today.

And it also means that the saint was humble enough to listen to his sister, even though the world did not.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** Benedict’s rule is a balance between prayer and work. Strive to keep this balance as you go about your day. Try asking God for help each time you face a task – paying the bills or giving a presentation or getting dinner on the table. And then thank God when each task is completed. What difference would it make in your life if you were to give prayer the same attention you give work?*

Tuesday of Holy Week
Day 36: Bearing Our Cross

For Reflection: This essay comes from a sermon Bishop Katharine preached on the Gospel of Mark, chapter 27, in which Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Some of the disciples think that Jesus is a prophet; others think he’s John the Baptist. Peter, though, offers a bold and dangerous response, certain to incur the wrath of the authorities: “You are the Messiah.”

It’s on the heels of this exchange that Jesus begins to prepare His followers for his suffering, death, and resurrection. Of course, they don’t get it, even three chapters later when Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph – the event we’ve come to commemorate as Palm Sunday.

It’s reassuring to me that even though the disciples don’t get, Jesus doesn’t abandon them. In fact, He asks them--begs them--to stay with Him throughout the

calamitous coming week. And even though Peter betrays Him, it is Peter on whom Jesus founds the Christian Church. There *is* hope for ordinary modern sinners like you and me.

Jesus wants to know what we think and how we feel. Jesus needs us. Most importantly, even when we stumble, Jesus' love for us never dies.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** The twentieth-century English mystery writer and theologian Dorothy L. Sayers believed that Jesus is whoever we say He is. What do you think? How much of a role do you think your beliefs and experiences play in who Jesus is? Think about this as you answer "Who do you say I am?" in your prayer today. Who is Jesus to you, and what does He mean in your life?*

Wednesday of Holy Week
Day 37: Calling All Saints

For Reflection: The reading for Monday of Holy Week (John 12.1-11) is the story of Jesus' visit to Bethany. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. When Judas complains that the money Mary spent on the perfume could have been used for the sake of the poor, Jesus reminds him, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." That's a puzzling statement – as puzzling as the Beatitudes that Bishop Katharine writes about. Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are those who mourn?

I think Mary of Bethany (by the way, scholars agree she's *not* Mary Magdalene) understands this paradox. Mary knows what it's like to be blessed by a deep longing for

God. And she will soon know what it is like to understand the deep layer of love mourning reveals. She suffers, but she is blessed by her love of Jesus.

So too are we blessed by *our* love of Jesus. It doesn't matter that we love Jesus imperfectly – it matters only that we love Him.

Suggestion for Prayer: Read John 12.1-11. Who is blessed in this story and how? Now, name your own blessings as a prayer of thanksgiving.

Maundy Thursday

Day 38: Why Exactly Are We Here?

For Reflection: In the Eastern Orthodox Church, a long hymn so beautiful it frequently moves people to tears is sung on during Holy Week. Written in the 9th century by a nun named Kassiani, the poetic hymn tells the story in Luke 7.36-50 about the sinful woman who washes Christ's feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Then she anoints his feet with the ointment from an alabaster jar. (By the way, it wasn't until the 3rd century that this unnamed woman's story became conflated with that of Jesus' disciple, Mary Magdalene.) Traditionally, this hymn serves as a sort of welcome to those who otherwise feel uncomfortable in church.

In Bishop Katherine's essay, she writes of the interruptions that can serve us well in our spiritual growth, if only we'll pay attention to them. This Holy Week, pay attention to the people you may not usually see in church. You may feel they're interrupting your worship and invading your comfort zone, but they may also be great

gifts. Remember, Jesus rebuked the “regulars” at table with Him, but He blessed the sinful woman and bade her to go in peace.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** Notice the interruptions in your life today. What blessings can you discover in them? Thank God for these unexpected gifts.*

Good Friday

Day 39: Stretched on the Frame of the Holy Spirit

For Reflection: Bishop Katherine’s reflections on being stretched like skin on the frame of a drum so God can play us got me thinking about a young woman I recently met. Katy has some useful thoughts for those of us concerned about the Church’s future. Raised and educated in the Roman Catholic Church, Katy’s current spiritual practices encompass Buddhist meditation, the charkas of Hinduism, chanting, nature, -- and most of all, drumming. She is a frequent participant in “completely collaborative, improvisational and intense” sacred circles in which participants drum, sing, chant, dance, and pray.

“I’m a young adult,” she says, “who’s not afraid to step outside conventional structures. There’s a lot of stuff out there – drumming, breath work, mediation, contemplative prayer -- that I didn’t find in my experience of Church. If these practices had been available within the church, maybe I wouldn’t have left it, because these are tools that help me be authentically connected to God.”

Katy stretches and challenges those of us who identify with the established Church. She makes me wonder what would happen if we dug a little deeper into our Christian “toolkits” and revised practices such as lectio divina, centering prayer, and the

daily office. Might we become more welcoming to people and ideas that would stretch us into becoming better Christians?

***Suggestion for Prayer:** Try to pray today borrowing a spiritual practice that makes you a little uncomfortable. Maybe it's simply sitting in silence. Perhaps it's singing a hymn aloud. Or maybe you'd like to try praying with prayer beads. Notice how you're stretched.*

Saturday of Holy Week
Day 40: God, with Skin

***For Reflection:** We are now at the end of Lent. If you've spent 40 days fighting the urge to eat chocolate, or struggling to say the Daily Office, you may have thought this day would never come. As for me, I vowed to use these forty days to try to forgive a woman who betrayed me once upon a time. To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure I've made much progress. While I realize it's more for me than for her that I need to forgive, I'm angry that in addition to having to endure a wrong, I also have the burden of needing to forgive. And yet, one of the biggest gifts I think I've ever received in my life was the opportunity to forgive my father, aloud, when he was on his deathbed. (He didn't respond, but that didn't matter.)*

As Bishop Katharine reminds us, forgiving is an opportunity to represent God, with skin on. It isn't an easy opportunity to grasp, but as Christians, we know we have Jesus to help us. After all, know one knows better than Jesus the courage it takes to be God, with skin on.

Suggestion for Prayer: *Pray for God's forgiveness of those who've wronged you.*

*As their faces come to mind, remember that each one of them is God's beloved child –
and so are you.*