Martyrdom: Dangerous Unselfishness

The Martyrs of Memphis and Mankato

St. John's, Linden Hills 9/8/24

This is a Sunday when we celebrate some martyrs of the Episcopal Church.

The feast day is called Constance and her Companions. They are also called the Martyrs of Memphis. And their story is a powerful and tragic story. It gave me a new and deeper understanding of martyrdom. In 1878 a yellow fever epidemic was raging in Memphis, the largest city in the American South. 30,000 of the 50,000 residents fled, as it was the third time yellow fever had found Memphis. But 20,000 residents, mostly Black, and mostly poor, had no way to escape and no place of safety. They were left behind to face an enemy they could not see, but which could kill them. Two hundred people a day were dying.

In this time of great danger and death, some stayed, risking their lives to help and care for the sick and dying. Among those who chose to stay were Constance, the Mother Superior of a small community of Episcopal nuns, The Sisters of St. Mary's. Mother Constance and her sisters, Sister Clare, Sister Thecla, Sister Ruth, and Sister Frances, joined by two Episcopal Priests, Louis Schyler and Charles Parsons. They stayed. They turned St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral which was at the epicenter of where the epidemic raged, into a makeshift hospital. They all contracted yellow fever, and all of them died, one by one, caring for others, who were also afflicted.

I was moved by the words of today's Psalm as I wrote this sermon and wondered if the companions found solace as life slipped away and wondered if they prayed them in their last hours. "The cords of death took hold of me; Then I called upon the Name of the Lord: O Lord, I pray you, save my life." I wonder. Do these words console them as the Corinthians letter promised?

Some years ago, while doing a preaching series in Memphis, I was taken to Elmwood Cemetery where Constance and her Companions are buried. Here, I thought, are true martyrs to the cause of healing, humanity and love.

The word martyr has been so diluted by using it to apply to situations that are not examples of healing, sacrifice, humanity and love. Like much of our political language, it has fallen into rank hyperbole. In religious history we find it often referring to those who chose to die for refusing to renounce their beliefs.

All this is legitimate in our Christian and other traditions. But I think there is a special category for martyrs of an especially praiseworthy kind. They chose freely to sacrifice their lives in the service of "the least of these," who Jesus calls us to serve. They embody the way of love of Jesus.

I cannot remember many times when I was as proud to be an Episcopalian as that day in Elmwood Cemetery. And while at Calvary Episcopal Church for the preaching series, I stood in the pulpit only a mile from the Lorraine Motel, where another martyr of Memphis was assassinated exactly 30 years earlier.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel, just a mile up the road from where I was preaching that day. And to add poignancy, it was the 30th anniversary of that fateful day the nation was robbed of his courage, wisdom and leadership. He, like the Companions, died standing up for the least of these, the woefully underpaid predominantly Black sanitation workers who were on strike, carrying signs, "I am a man!" Some were paid only a dollar an hour.

Imagine the courage of these men, who were beset on all sides by threatening people. Dr. King. too, knew there would be trouble. His staff tried to dissuade him from even going to Memphis. King had fairly recently been stabbed and nearly died and their ominous threats had been received. The night before his death, he preached at a packed Memphis Church to an overflow crowd. He was exhausted, had a sore throat, was feeling ill, and, as if to match his mood, outside, there was a raging thunderstorm.

And inside, Martin Luther King Jr. had his Gethsemane moment.

He began by asking himself where in history would he want to have lived. His sermon that night spoke of history of liberation in Scripture-the children of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt; of Moses seeing but not getting to the promised land; of the emancipation of slaves in 1863. But he said that he would choose being right there, in the midst of the turmoil of the 1960s as people from South Africa to the people of Memphis and the American South were rising up to embrace the promise of freedom. He attacked racial and economic inequality, he called the waring nations to peace, because as he said, "the choice is between non-violence or non-existence." He praised the courage of those who faced the dogs, water hoses and violence to stand for freedom. As he closed, he called the people to "a kind of dangerous unselfishness" that called for risking and sacrifice to serve the least of these. In this case it was the sanitation workers. I place those words in the same category as Representative John Lewis calling us to "good trouble." I find myself asking what it is we are called to in this fraught and dangerous time in our nation's political history.

And then he closed "Well, I don't know what will happen now. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned with that now. I just want to do God's will. God has allowed me to go up the mountain and I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."
And we are not sure what else he said because the congregation was so with him in that journey, so full of emotion, that it did not die down for many minutes.

And here in Minnesota, we too have our martyrs. There is our Patron Saint, Enmegahbowh the Ojibwe Priest who tirelessly sought to keep the Ojibwe from entering the Dakota Rebellion of 1862. In the process, two of his children froze to death as he tirelessly went from village to village to prevent the war from spreading saving many lives.

The Dakota rose up because the provisions promised by treaty that would have kept the people fed over the winter were being held in a warehouse, and the agent refused to release the food. Now that they had been pushed off their agricultural and hunting lands into a tiny strip of land along the Minnesota River there was widespread hunger.

For a time, the Dakota were successful in chasing the white residents from their farms and villages. But Federal troops were called away from the Civil War battlefields to quell the rebellion.

At the end of the war, the entire Dakota nation was pushed by The Minnesota State Militia into a concentration camp in the river bottoms below Fort Snelling where the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers meet. Ironically, it is in Dakota tradition, Bdote, the place of creation.

A kangaroo court condemned over 300 Dakota men to death. The first Bishop of our Diocese, Henry Benjamin Whipple, a friend of President Lincoln, went to Washington to plead for the Dakota and for the many who did not fight, but actually protected their white neighbors with whom they worshiped Sunday by Sunday. Whipple and many of the Episcopal clergy and lay leaders had been serving among the sick and dying at the concentration camp and knew of the suffering and that many of the 300 plus condemned men had done harm to no one. Lincoln and his staff, with Whipple and others were able to find no reason why the majority of the men were condemned. The number to be hung was reduced to 38 by Lincoln.

What then transpired was why I speak to you of the Martyrs of Mankato, in the same breath as Constance and her companions, and Dr. King. The late Gary Cavender, a Dakota priest and scholar of Dakota history related this story to me. His grandmother had heard the story from her grandmother. I trust the oral tradition.

Dakota Elders among the people from the Mdewakantowan (Dwellers by the mystic lake), the Sisetowan and Wakpetuwan (Dwellers among the leaves) conspired to substitute themselves for the men with young families to raise. They chose to die on that awful day in Mankato in the place of their brothers.

Bishop Whipple, upon hearing that some of his Diocesan and parish leaders, and Dakota leaders from the Presbyterian and Congregational churches were among those who were volunteering to die for their brothers, while wholly innocent. Whipple was outraged and sternly told the elders they could not do what they planned. It was simply not right that the innocent should die. One elder, whose name the oral tradition does not name, spoke to Whipple, saying, “Was it not you, Bishop, who told us that Jesus went to the cross wholly innocent? Was it not you who showed us in scripture where it says, ‘greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for friend.”

Whipple relented.

I wonder if that elder remembered the lines from John's gospel for today? "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it first dies, and is buried, it bears much fruit." The Dakota were agriculturalists and would have understood perfectly. That's why we sing "Now the green blade riseith" today. I've asked myself what is the fruit that this sacrifice created.

I would have cried out "Father save me from this hour," but nothing of that sort was said on the gallows as far as reports tell.

We do not know who these men were. But as their life ended, we do know this. The nation's newspapers reported that "these blood thirsty savages seemed completely unbowed, and proudly sang their heathen death chants." Some may have sung Dakota facing death chants. Some however, sang the hymn from the Dakota Odowan, their hymnal, that we sing today from our hymnal, "Many and Great oh God Are thy things, maker of earth and sky." Today's Psalm again comes to mind "The Lord watches over the innocent."

Martyrs? Certainly, these brave and devout elders were. They join the rich and sometimes tragic history of our diocese, and our state. Despite my best efforts, and those of Dakota scholars, we have not been able to discern the names of these men who followed the way of love of Jesus, not only saving white neighbors but offering their lives for the future of the Dakota nation.

All those years ago, I was so moved at Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis that I asked permission to sing a Lakota chant to honor these true heroes of the faith. I want to sing it to honor the martyrs we remember today.

Its words translate, roughly,

"In the center of the Earth I am standing, and I am praying as I stand. To you, Constance and your companions I am praying as I stand."

Chanted: Maka Cokan nawajin na

Hoheya nawajin yelo.

Mother Constance oyate wan, hoheya

Nawajin yelo."

And then for Martin Luther King (MLKing) and for the unnamed Martyrs of Mankato. (Mankato Martyrs)