

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush, March 29, 2009**  
**John 12:20-33**  
**Journey to the Cross: “Pulling Nails”**

I know of a vacation house in the hills of Vermont, a large wooden cabin built on a sloping, woodland hill. It is not heated, so families only use it in the summer. Because of its age and the persistence of neighborhood animals looking for shelter from the cold, it needs constant repair – replacing shingles loosened by squirrels, plugging gaps between the chimney and the wall where garter snakes or the occasional, friendly bat have found access inside. One summer it was obvious that the guest bathroom needed to be worked on. Along the rafters, two holes were visible where mice had chewed through the fiberboard paneling and made nests between the fiberboard and the stud walls. More than likely, they had been doing this for a while; even though the holes had only recently become visible, that special aroma of mouse droppings now filled the room with its fragrant bouquet. So tools were gathered; breathing masks purchased; and work commenced on removing the fiberboard and the illegal occupants lodging behind the guest bathroom wall. Stay tuned for more.

Our gospel lesson begins in the city of Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus’ triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. He had raised Lazarus from the dead, and because of this miracle, crowds of people were anxious to meet the young rabbi from Nazareth. The persistent buzz over Jesus caused the Jerusalem hotshots to mutter derisively, “Look, the whole world has gone after him!” (Jn 12:19) And sure enough, we are told how foreigners, Greek believers attracted to the Jewish faith, had come for Passover and had pulled Philip aside to see if he could introduce them to Jesus. There was something about his message that attracted Jews and non-Jews, children of Abraham and children of the world, bringing them together into a new community. It was a special time, a Kairos moment. Or, as Jesus would say, “Behold, the hour has come.”

His message was not a superficial one. Jesus was not promising those who believed in his message that life would be a bed of roses, that henceforth all would be peaceful, painless, and prosperous. The fact that he wasn’t superficial made his message so powerful. Jesus spoke about foundational truths, about the nature of life and hope and faith in a way that brought sense into a senseless, random world.

He said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single seed; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Grains of wheat must die to what they are if they are not to remain alone and fruitless. We too must die to our insularity, our fixation on our own needs to the exclusion of others, lest in loving ourselves above all else we paradoxically lose ourselves, our ability to bear fruit in the world.<sup>1</sup> This is not some Gnostic hatred of the physical body or form of spiritual self-abuse. It is simply the insistence that life cannot be hoarded away. In giving, we gain even more. In dying to the world’s definitions of power and a prosperous life, we discover the true power of love and gain the horizon of eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

How this occurs involves another paradox. Jesus said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32). Jesus would die, lifted up on a cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem. A crowd would gather around him, literally drawn to the spectacle. But the phrase “lifted up” does not just mean being physically raised to a higher level; it also means to be exalted and glorified. In the act of being lifted up on a cross, people are drawn to this story of the innocent Son of God dying for our sake. But in the same act of being lifted up, exalted through a death and a resurrection, all people are drawn into this story – Jewish disciples, Greek believers, Americans, Africans, Australians, literally billions of people are pulled into this story and worship this crucified-yet-risen Savior as Lord and God. We allow the seeds of our own lives to die so that tenfold, twenty-fold, a hundredfold fruit may emerge in its place. In a world focused on #1, we profess “We follow a different #1 and that has changed the way we see everything. Alleluia!”

Back in the Vermont cabin, the tools had been gathered and work was about to commence on repairing the bathroom wall. The fiberboard had been around for decades, so Lord only knew what was behind it. The main problem was how to remove it. Cutting the fiberboard was tedious work; you never knew if you were going to hit a horizontal crossbeam. Tearing the fiberboard was extremely messy, dusty work, with no amount of crowbars or elbow grease fully capable of exposing the inner wall. It soon became clear that the only way to remove the fiberboard was to pull out all the nails that held it in place – each and every one, up the studs, along the crossbeams, under the molding, literally dozens of them. It meant isolating each nail head, pounding the hammer claw under it, prying out the nail, tossing it into a nearby tin can, and then moving on to the next nail – over and over and over again.

There is something cathartic about pulling nails. It means you are willing to remove something of the past in order to put in place something for the future. You see clearly all the bent nails, the sins and shortcomings of past efforts. But you know you have a chance for a fresh start – that the new design with its new nails will hopefully be an improvement. It’s the right thing to do and in this case, it was the right way to do the job.

Hold on to that thought as we consider one last thing Jesus said during that Passover festival in Jerusalem. Yes, the whole world was flocking to him. And to them he said, “Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit. Those who love their life lose it, while stepping away from the flawed ways of this world and the demands of this life leads to eternal life.” Then he spoke words to which all of us can relate. Jesus said, “Now my soul is troubled. What should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

“Now my soul is troubled.” When have you said that in your own life? When you have lost confidence in yourself or lost trust in someone else. When you are worried about the future or worried about how what you’ve done today will affect your tomorrows. When you are concerned about our community, our nation, our world. When you think about false powers and pollution, war, street violence, rape, and the relentless list of human pain that is endured every day.

“Now is my soul troubled.” O God, hear my prayer. What should I do, O God? Lord, have mercy. When you find yourself praying these words, as people of faith, we tend to offer two common answers. To them, I’d like to offer a third option. “Now is my soul troubled” – and in that moment we first look to the cross. The cross reminds us how the world is, even as it challenges us to believe in how it is meant to be and one day will be. The cross is a place of truth that speaks of love and hate, about humankind and God, about life and death and life once more. It is why we sing spirituals like “Were You There?” to remember the parts of our life that caused the cross in the first place. But more importantly, there is something about that cross, that innocent suffering, the idea of God becoming flesh and taking on solidarity with our pain, our loneliness, even to the point of death, which helps us get through our times of trouble. Knowing that story relativizes and disempowers everything that would hurt or destroy us in this life.

“Now is my soul troubled.” In addition to looking to the cross, we look to the promise of resurrection, the Easter good news. The one lifted up on the cross is simultaneously the one exalted. His death leads to resurrection life; that man-made lifting up on a cross will be replaced by a heaven-made lifting up to new life. This is not just “pie in the sky” theology. It is not avoiding present pain by wishing for the “sweet bye and bye” yet to come. It is an assurance made real in the Easter story that the seed which dies will bear much fruit. That in this world we will know tribulation, but there is one, Christ the Lord, who has overcome this world. For as the apostle Paul has said, “This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (2 Cor 4:17). By faith, our eyes see both the landscape around us, with its joys and sorrows, and the far horizon, the place of promised healing, rest, and peace.

But when your soul is troubled, and you think of the cross – or you cling to the good news of the resurrection – and yet you still ask “What then should I do?”, I would suggest that you start pulling nails. Think about it. Between the cross and the empty tomb, there was a time when someone had to remove Jesus’ body from the cross. They had to pull out the nails that had kept him there on that instrument of death. They had to remove the things of a sinful past so that a blessed future might be born.

If you’re not sure what to do in your life, what better option might there be than to pull nails that are inflicting pain on others? Nails of violence hammered into victims right here or nearby. Nails of aggression, of capital punishment, of flawed policies of preemptive war, of vengeance against others. Nails of economic imbalance, of loneliness, of believing that everyone has forgotten you and no one cares anymore. Small nails designed for children; large nails designed for entire groups oppressed through words and deeds and laws. Without pulling nails on Good Friday, there is no body in the tomb and no resurrection on Easter. What was true then is still true today.

“Now is my soul troubled. What should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” Christ’s prayer is our prayer. There is much to be repaired, many nails to be pulled. But be of good cheer: In Jesus Christ, we’ve seen how the repair job ends. And it is good work indeed.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Farley, Feasting on the Word, John 12:20-33 – Theological Perspective, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Texts for Preaching: Cycle B, Fifth Sunday of Lent, p. 239.