

“BRACED FOR ADVERSITY”

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Confirmation begins in baptism. Our youth today confirm vows made over them at baptism and fully own the vows in an adult, aware way. So I begin in baptism also. When the Greek Orthodox baptize, it's almost always an infant. It is a tiny baby, not a squirmy six year old. A warm, moist baby who still smells like sky, earth, and fragrant herbs of spring. Do you know that sweet scent of a newborn?

Anyway, after baptizing, the Orthodox priest takes a large pectoral cross—as big as necklaces rap artists wear—and strikes the baby on its breast, hard enough to surprise and alarm the child. The child cries out like the old-fashioned bum slap of a delivering obstetrician. Notice, in the West, we give a rose at baptism. But in the East, it is a rap with a cross. The symbolism of the Orthodox baptism is clear.

The blow says all baptized into Christ must also bear his cross. And the cross is not a remote, sanitized symbol from long ago. It stands for the world of trouble, sorrow, suffering and death borne by Jesus for sins he did not commit, and our following of him. Of course, by that same cross all dark and evil realities are also overcome. That story is fresh for all of us having just celebrated Easter Sunday.

Frankly, both ancient Christian traditions speak, the rose of the Western church and the cross thump of the Eastern Orthodox. They get at different meanings. They help us set the tone for today, when we would confirm the faith of 20 young people with great tenderness, but resist the urge for cheap, sentimental grace.

Let's start with the tenderness. Every year it amazes me the deep feeling confirming the faith of our young awakens in me. I am as touched to confirm these 20 as I was with my daughters, whom I baptized and confirmed. And that is right and as it should be. Today the water of the baptism basin is even thicker than the blood in our veins. Today is about passing on our faith to a new generation. Today is about owning the church's faith as a shared lifetime spiritual foundation. Today is about their relationship with God, how that outlasts every other earthly relationship—schooling, friends, marriage, children--even unto eternity. This is something monumental. This is to be celebrated. This always deeply affects me.

Of course, sounding that note of tenderness, it doesn't hurt one bit that these are tremendous young people. They have won over my heart. Not just because 8th grade was the worst year of my life and they seemingly handle it better than I did.

But pushing them with a conversation unlike those they've had before, a conversation whose centrality they can't yet fully grasp, a conversation of faith to transform the rest of the logic by which we live our lives with the wisdom of the cross, they were patient with me. Even when they were only getting part of it or none of

it, they gave me a fair hearing. Let's face it, these sacred mysteries into which we initiate them don't easily yield themselves into words. They are mysteries beyond words. And our confirmands learned this by writing their own statements of faith.

But they hung in there as we together attempted an alternative version of life with God smack dab at the center. I am sure at times they wanted to roll their eyes or blurt out, "What are you talking about?" But they always respected my office of ministry, which is more than some adults. That goes deeper than politeness and good manners, which they have in abundance. (Way to go parents!) It means they sensed the momentous reality we strove to convey beneath the surface of things.

By respecting that, they respected God. So I thank all 20 of you for your patient listening and engaging with me even as the greater dimensions of what we were about were not always obvious. The more honest I was with you, even when it was something you didn't expect about me or the faith, the closer you listened; the more vulnerable I became, the more you sensed how much all of this matters.

So it would be wrong for the tenderness of this moment to be lost upon us. But it would be wrong to become sappy and sloppy about what is at stake here today. The cross of Christ guards us against sentimentality. Sentimentality wants easy, tractable solutions to deep abiding mysteries of loss, ache, and pain. It wants fast answers and quick turnarounds, unlike the patient abiding we heard Paul urging the Corinthians. We fail to see the steady diet of sentimentality in our popular culture, the fake spirituality where no problem is so great the couple can't laugh it off and come out smiling in the end, the theology of Hallmark cards with sing-song sayings. Then we bring this sentimentality into the church and hold the gospel accountable to it. Stanley Hauerwas claims sentimentality is killing today's church.

We've tried to disabuse our confirmands of the idea that Christians are issued a get out of jail free card exempting us from turmoil and tribulation. We want them to be able to say in the face of adversity, as others feel forlorn, abandoned, and lost, "My faith was made for such a time as this. I get it." But realizing that demands more than mutually affirming each other as nice, polite, civilized people.

By making the cross our centerpiece we remind each other that only a shabby faith suggests God should do all of the heavy lifting and we do none. The story of God's people has adversity as an anvil upon which character is forged. Where all adversity gets airbrushed away, a deep, transforming faith becomes impossible. Peter Gomes says ours is "not a faith of evasion, a faith of success, or a faith of unambiguous pleasure and delight." Real faith emerges as we bear Christ's cross.

I'd planned to say a few other things about this, but instead I will say only one. Did you read the front page of the Friday NY times about the doctors shot at a hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan? If you haven't, I beg you confirmation parents to read it to your child. The picture at the top of the article was of Dr. Jerry Umanos.

Dr. Umanos finished his residency at the University of Michigan in 1982. He could have practiced in Darien or Bronxville, Wellesley or Grosse Pointe. Instead he served the inner city of Chicago at a Christian clinic for the same rate of pay as when he was a resident. In 2005, he and his wife visited Afghanistan. The sad state of children there broke his heart. So he opted to serve through the CURE international network of Christian mission hospitals. He was a volunteer in Kabul, treating the children and teaching Afghan doctors how to serve as pediatricians.

He knew all the risks of working in that part of the world as a westerner. But his heart was set on training a new generation of doctors to give care in Afghanistan. He had a heart for the Afghans, as was evidenced by mastering their language. He worked well in that setting, with his natural sense of humor and basic humility.

Last week westerners stopped by to visit him at the CURE hospital in Kabul. They stepped out to photograph them all together out front. As they returned, the policeman charged with hospital security opened fire, killed Jerry and two others. Even the nefarious Taliban refused to claim credit for a crime so heinous as this.

Yes, I call him Jerry. He and I were raised in the same church in Detroit. The Umanos family, Filipinos, were the only family of color in our lily white Swedish church. We attended the same youth group and church camp every summer. We played James Bond in my basement and board games in his. And the thing is, living as Christ's hands and feet, offering his gifts for God to a people after his own heart, he wouldn't have done anything differently. Don't feel sorry for him. Emulate him. And pray churches like ours are capable of producing more Jerry's.

So I leave with you Paul's galvanizing words, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." Friends, these are the eternal promises of God. Amen.

II Corinthians 4.1, 5-11, 16-18, 5.1,5

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. . . For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, (but) eternal in the heavens.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.