

On this Laetare Sunday, this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we do something a little different. It's evident in the different color of vestments I (and the Deacon) wear, and it is similar in idea to what happens on the third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete Sunday) when we "step out" a little from our season of sacrifice to look forward to the great event we will eventually celebrate. In Advent, we "step out" to remind ourselves of the impending birth of our Savior. Here, in Lent we "step out" to remind ourselves of the ultimate mystery that shapes our Christian lives. And that is, the Paschal Mystery: namely, that out of the greatest curse of human life (which is death) can come new and eternal life.

On a basic, human (as well as) biological level, we know that death is a mystery and at the same time a necessity for continued life. In the natural, physical world, things are either “coming into” or “passing out” of being. The very things in our world that are alive, **remain so** because something else has died to give it life. For example, look at the ongoing relationship of predator and pray; like the lion and the antelope. Without life there is no death, and without death there is no life.

We know this phenomena is true; it is a fact of life you might say. It is a fact of our natural/physical world, and it is a fact of the spiritual as well. Just as an antelope’s death gives a lion new life, in the same manner (for the Christian) Christ’s death made possible the new life of resurrection. It couldn’t have been any other way, because life and death are the fabric of our reality.

And the reality we acknowledge this Sunday is just that. We have new life because something, Someone, has died for us. We have new life in God's kingdom because His Son died for us. However, just like a newborn child, that new life has to be nourished and sustained. But here's the catch. As children of the kingdom, God's kingdom, we are sustained and nourished not by taking in, but by giving away; not by living on the death of something else, but by dying to self. Jesus said very clearly, "whoever serves me must follow me." A servant follows his master because the master sustains the servant's life. So where did our master go? Where must we follow him so that He might sustain our lives? YOU GOT IT. The cross.

At the cross, heaven and earth meet. God's ways come face to face with the world's ways. Both promise life and happiness, but only **one** is true and everlasting. Only by carrying, bearing, and dying on His cross, did Jesus bring the life of heaven to a fallen world. Only by bearing and carrying **our** crosses, do we learn to die to self and so follow our master, so that where He is we also may be. In doing so, we begin to experience the life of heaven here on earth, and give others a taste of God's goodness as well. Hopefully, they too will be inspired to follow Jesus' way, the way of the cross.

In following Jesus way, we come to an *acute awareness* of the truth that by dying to self in Christ can, indeed, be our greatest gift to others. In this perspective, life is a long journey of preparation – of preparing oneself to truly die for others. It is a series of “*little*” *daily* deaths, in which we are asked to release our many forms of clinging, and move *increasingly* from needing others, to living for them. The many passages we have to make as we grow throughout our lives, offer ever-new opportunities to choose for ourselves or to choose for others. Questions keep coming up during these passages and confront us with hard choices: Do I desire power or service; do I want to be visible or remain hidden; do I want to strive for success and recognition above all else, or do I keep following God’s call and invitation, no matter the cost? In *this* sense, we can speak about life as an ongoing process of dying to self, so that we will be able to live in the joy of God, by serving him and giving our lives for the *least* He identifies Himself with.

It is in **this** sense, that we can embrace and walk out of here with a true understanding of our Lord's words on our hearts and in our minds: "that whoever loves his life will lose it, and whoever hates or loses his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." That is Jesus' way. That is the way of the cross. And so, must it be our way. In the words of the late Bishop Fulton Sheen, "Only by **carrying** the Cross can one reach the Resurrection." As Christ embraced His cross and brought new life to the world, so may we embrace ours and in dying our little, daily deaths, bring that same hope and life to those around us and in so doing, discover life in the very act of giving it away.