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## *Disciples of the Dispossessed*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**Proper 18 – Year C**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and our redeemer. Amen. —Psalm 19:14 (adapt.)*

For two weeks in a row now we face extreme challenges in our scripture readings. Last week we faced the challenges of extreme humility and hospitality. And now, as if those challenges weren't enough, this week's challenges are even more demanding. How are we to respond when Jesus goes to the following extremes?

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

And with the next extreme he says:

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

And in his final extreme he says:

"None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:26-27, 33).

Well, church, we are barely two minutes into this week's gospel message. And I don't know about you but already I feel the need for relief! That's right: give me some relief from the extreme demands that Jesus puts on us to be his disciples. Now there are some familiar ways we can get relief from extreme challenges in religious teachings. In addition to outright ignoring those teachings—which is always an option of course, instead we can just spiritualize them. And one of our most familiar ways to spiritualize sacred texts is to say that they're only symbolic. It's really referring symbolically, we say, to something that's not meant to be taken literally.

In that way we could say that extreme teachings like those of Jesus in our gospel today express outward symbols of things that are best understood to point to a more inward, spiritual reality.

Well, with that focus on symbols I want to offer us a way forward using the following cartoon. It's a classic New Yorker magazine cartoon that illustrates the modern distinction between symbolic and material realities. The cartoon depicts an ancient ritual somewhere in Mesoamerica as practiced by the Inca or the Aztecs or the Mayans. At the base of a mountainous pyramid two priests are ascending on either side of a ritual victim. He is being escorted between them as the three figures are just beginning to ascend a long stairway. The stairway leads to a temple mount at the top of the pyramid that looks symbolically like the head of a god. On either side of the monumental godhead there are flaming torches sending ceremonial smoke into a clouded sky.

Each priest is wearing sacred garments that include many feathers on top of a lofty headdress. And each of them is carrying a staff in one hand that has a skull-head stuck on top of the staff. So that's the background; and you get the picture. Now with their other hands the priests are holding between them the victim who wears only one feather and is bare-chested.

And the cartoon features him turning his head to listen to one of the two priests who makes the following remark as if to reassure the victim:

“Except for the actual sacrifice,” he says, “Except for the actual sacrifice, all this is largely symbolic.”



*"Except for the actual sacrifice, all this is largely symbolic."*

New Yorker Cartoon by: Frank Cotham; Condé Nast Collection, [CN Item #: 12807539](#)

That's right, he says, “all this is largely symbolic” at the same time that he is escorting his victim to become the “actual sacrifice.”

And of course the reason it's a cartoon is that we viewers get to be amused at this absurd attempt to reassure the victim. We are amused by the priest's ridiculous reassurance that makes the 'actual sacrifice' seem incidental while the 'largely symbolic' becomes more significant. And of course we are amused because we can see through the priest's remark; that it cannot possibly be reassuring to the victim.

In that connection we viewers also get to be flattered that we see through a flimsy and banal attempt to cover up something actual by deflecting attention to things symbolic. On a final note, maybe the priest is even trying to impress his victim by boasting that he sees through the symbols and, unlike everyone else, understands what is really going on in terms of what is actual—the actual sacrifice.

Well, church, what is really going on? Maybe what is really going on is that we ourselves are at risk of a modern conceit; the conceit of imagining that we see through the things occurring around us as 'largely symbolic.' Meanwhile there are actual sacrifices occurring alongside or within things that we think are largely symbolic—actual sacrifices that are more important and consequential than we are acknowledging in our conceit.

In that connection I would be remiss if I did not observe this week's commemoration and exaltation of a contemporary icon of the symbolic and the sacrificial. For this very Sunday of September 4 features the canonization into sainthood of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Mother Teresa was born an Albanian Roman Catholic in the former Yugoslavia in 1910 and died in 1997. In 1928 she became a nun and in the 1940s began rescuing the corpses of the dead and the near-corpse of the dying from the streets of Calcutta in India. When she received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 she became world famous for founding a Roman Catholic order now totaling 4500 women: the Missionaries of Charity. Today her missionaries specialize in caring for the dead and for the dying worldwide and even here in Atlanta, particularly serving the victims of diseases like AIDS.

After she herself died in 1997 she was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2003, and has—God-willing—already been canonized in Rome today [September 4, 2016] as a saint by Pope Francis. Now in the following statement she expressed in her own words the symbolism of her saintly, Christ-like identity most clearly. She wrote:

“This is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world. Seeing and adoring the presence of Jesus, especially in the lowly appearance of bread, and in the distressing disguise of the poor.”

[www.goodreads.com/quotes/252963-seeking-the-face-of-god-in-everything-everyone-all-the](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/252963-seeking-the-face-of-god-in-everything-everyone-all-the) or  
[www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1404196-in-the-heart-of-the-world-thoughts-stories-and-prayers](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1404196-in-the-heart-of-the-world-thoughts-stories-and-prayers)

Thus in her practice of the contemplative life we observe in Mother Teresa two kinds of symbols: symbols like “the lowly appearance of bread” in the Catholic mass and, related to that, the symbolic presence of Jesus “in the distressing disguise of the poor.” Also in her active life of service there are two places where we can observe an “actual sacrifice.” First she clearly sacrificed her life in the care and compassion that she devoted to the sick and dying people she served.

But less obviously she experienced ‘carrying her cross’ in the spiritual darkness that many commentators now emphasize in her life. That inner suffering has been verified in the collection of her private journals and letters published after her death.

[In the book] *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, the nun so widely revered for her spiritual purity acknowledged [times] that she did not personally feel God’s presence.

“In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss,” [she wrote](#), “of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not existing.”

One commentator, Jesuit priest [James Martin, S.J.](#) (whose book, *My Life with the Saints*, recounts his own spiritual journey), observes that:

Mother Teresa dealt with such pain by telling God, “Even though I don’t feel you, I believe in you.” That statement of faith, he says, makes her example relevant and meaningful to contemporary Christians who also struggle with [spiritual darkness and] doubt.

“Ironically,” he says, “this most traditional saint becomes a saint for modern times.”

[[www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/08/31/491937448/how-the-catholic-church-documented-mother-teresas-two-miracles](http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/08/31/491937448/how-the-catholic-church-documented-mother-teresas-two-miracles)]

That is an ironic claim, isn’t it? In her calling to be a most traditional nun, taking to extremes her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, Mother Teresa has become a model for modern people like us; people who are likewise called to persevere in faith, hope and love despite our own struggle with doubt and spiritual darkness. Thus I commend to us here today Saint Teresa’s heroic virtue; the virtue that combines the largely symbolic and with the actually sacrificial. May she intercede for us, praying that we may become the kind of disciples that Jesus calls for, and that the extreme circumstance in the world today call for.

Finally church family and friends, we will gather before this altar in the next several minutes to consecrate symbols of bread and wine. In that way we will once again celebrate and enshrine the real presence of Jesus here among us. My prayer for each of you is that, inspired and renewed by that presence, you may go forth into the world as a symbol—yes, a symbol of that broken bread and poured out wine for the life of the world. And in all the places where your life is broken and poured out, may you also be consecrated as actual sacrifices for the life of the world.

And now in the words of our closing hymn, as we process out at the end of the service; in those words I enjoin you:

Go forth into the world in peace.  
Be of good courage;  
hold fast that which is good;  
render to no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the faint-hearted;  
support the weak;  
help the afflicted;  
honor all persons;  
love and serve the Lord,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And the blessing of God Almighty—

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be upon you and remain with you always. Amen.\*

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\*“Go Forth into the World in Peace” is an anthem composed by John Rutter (b. 1945) and accessed with these lyrics at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CQPlmKETDQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CQPlmKETDQ) . The closing hymn for today’s worship service was “Go Forth for God; Go to the World in Peace;” Words: John Peacey (1896-1971); Music: *Litton*, Erik Routley (1917-1982), *The Hymnal 1982*, no. 347. The words for both the anthem and the hymn are adaptations and expansions of the scripture verses at 1 Thessalonians 5:13-16.

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