

The Rt. Rev. J. Scott Mayer  
Sermon at the Spring Retreat of Bishops  
5 Lent – Year C  
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I would like to begin this morning with a couple of personal remarks. First, I would like to express my gratitude for the privilege of serving God and God's Church with all of you. You have my admiration, respect, and affection – all of which grows exponentially with each passing year.

And, I'm doing something a little new for me this morning. I've done it before, but not in the last seven months. So, I'm a little nervous about it. I'm not going to open the sermon by quoting our new Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry; that would be weird.

It is a new day in the life of The Episcopal Church, just as it was a new day nine years ago. In reality, it's always a new day. According to Isaiah, the Lord said a long, long time ago: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

I am mindful of an encounter I had at St James Episcopal Church in Dalhart, Texas. Dalhart is a town of about 8,000 people, located in the Northwest corner of the Texas Panhandle. It's actually closer to seven other state capitals than it is to the state capital of Texas.

At any rate, after Sunday services, I was walking through the Sunday school classrooms. I had removed my mitre after the celebration of the Eucharist, of course, and this beautiful 6-year-old girl looks up at me, and she sees the red line across my forehead from wearing my new tight-fitting mitre. And she says, "Does that crown hurt your head?"

It's interesting that when I tell that story, people tend to say, "How sweet of that little girl to be so concerned and compassionate" – and it is sweet. Or maybe they say something like, "Yeah, heavy is the head that wears the crown," or "Being bishop must be like wearing a crown of thorns" (bless our hearts) – and it could be like that. Bishop Romero comes to mind.

But that's not the point in telling the story. It's what the little girl SEES that gets my attention. She sees a crown, along with a cape that would make Henry the 8<sup>th</sup> proud. Now for the benefit of our colleagues from the Diocese of West Texas – bishops Lillibridge and Reed – a mitre is that hat many of us wear during liturgies. It's

supposed to represent Pentecostal tongues of fire – the Holy Spirit – but, I’m afraid people see a king or queen.

Well, of course, the bishop is not a king or queen. And furthermore, the Church is not an empire – not anymore. News may travel slowly, but those days are gone. Praise God. The days have long passed since the Church saw itself as an empire, as we have moved through the Reformation and the Enlightenment (God doing a new thing) into this Post-Constantinian time, as we wonder what’s next on the horizon.

It seems everybody is writing about it. Hauerwas and Willimon say we’re in a Post-Constantinian Age; Douglas John Hall says “post Christendom;” Tickle, Butler-Bass, and McLaren call it the Great Emergence; Harvey Cox says we’re moving from the Age of Belief (meaning belief systems) to the Age of the Spirit; Huston Smith calls this “the second revolution of the human spirit.”

It’s worthy of note that none of these theologians are saying this is bad. I wonder this – I wonder if we are witnessing – and participating in – a long, slow move from a posture of triumphalism (the Church Triumphant of the empire) to a Servant Church (a Cruciform Church inclined to follow the way of the Cross).

As most of you know, last July I became the new Provisional Bishop of Fort Worth – following our colleagues Ted Gulick, Wallis Ohl, and Rayford High in that capacity. God is doing a new thing in Fort Worth. This is a diocese which was devastated by a split eight years ago, and has since traveled through the journey of grief and all the manifestations of grief.

But this is not a diocese trying to re-build the old church. In fact, we are trying to take the word “re-build” out of our vocabulary. We are not seeking resuscitation primarily. I know that today’s Gospel says that Lazarus was raised from the dead, but we understand that to be resuscitation. I’ll take resuscitation in spots, and I’m sure that Lazarus and his family and friends and even Jesus were happy with it. But as a diocese, we are not seeking resuscitation to the same old body; we are participating in the resurrection to a new life, a new body.

One particular displaced congregation meets in a theatre in Arlington – Theatre Arlington. Never before have I presided in a place with better dressing rooms, better restrooms, better seating, and a better sound system. After the celebration of the Eucharist, I met with the congregation and the vestry. And members told me that they’ve learned much from not owning a building – among them, that their resources can go toward outreach and clergy salaries.

We all know what comes before resurrection. We know that something has to die first; death precedes resurrection. Sometimes, as the story goes, death comes in the form of crucifixion. And Fort Worth has some faithful Christians who have paid a price to be Episcopalians in their context. It's been costly, and I'm not talking just about money and property. I'm not just talking about reputations – about being the “skunk at the garden party” in your own hometown. I'm talking about health, friendships, and family – real costs.

I wonder how many times Jesus tells potential followers about the cost of discipleship. As Dean Wolfe pointed out on Friday, it doesn't seem like a great evangelism strategy. And yet, to one particularly enthusiastic crowd Jesus turns and stunningly tells them: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” He says, if you want to follow me on this journey to Jerusalem, then first, calculate the cost. And then Jesus gives them a couple of examples: first the story of the tower builder. He says: “Who, intending to build a tower, does not first estimate the cost to see whether he has enough to build it? Otherwise, if he fails to complete it, he will be ridiculed.” And then Jesus gives another example, saying: “What king, waging war, won't consider whether he has enough troops to win?”

Two examples of calculating the cost; two examples Jesus gives, so that every person in the crowd can ask themselves: “Do I have what it takes? Do I have what it takes to finish the mission? Do I have what it takes to do the job, to win the battle, to emerge victorious when we arrive in Jerusalem? Do I have what it takes to win?” At least, that's how it sounds.

Undoubtedly, Jesus is telling the crowd to count the cost. That's true. But I wonder if the challenging question is really: “Do I have what it takes to win?” I wonder if it's another question.

For it seems to me that the examples Jesus gives of calculating the costs (the two examples, the tower builder and the king waging war) are not necessarily examples to follow. Maybe more so, they are simply observations of how we typically behave.

For example, we DO calculate ahead of time whether we can finish a job, because we don't want to be ridiculed if we fail. That's how we feel. That's how we behave. We calculate ahead of time, because we don't want to be embarrassed; don't want to be seen as someone without the fortitude to finish the job; don't want to be seen as someone without the character to follow through.

We don't want to fail or lose. We calculate the cost, Jesus says, because we don't want to embarrass ourselves, or be seen as losers, or failures, or have our character questioned.

So, I wonder, maybe Jesus is not so much challenging the crowd – and challenging us – to ask ourselves: “Do I have what it takes to WIN?” But rather, “Do I have what it takes to LOSE?”

Maybe he's saying to potential disciples: “Are you prepared to fail? Are you prepared to fall short, unable to finish the mission? Are you prepared to be embarrassed, and laughed at, and ridiculed? Are you prepared to lose – lose everything – even your life?”

Do you have what it takes to LOSE? – the vulnerability, the humility, the faith to lose? If you need to be a winner; if you need to be seen by others as a winner to be validated; if you need to win to feel affirmed; if losing, and associating with the cultural “losers” of the world is beneath you ... then don't follow me to Jerusalem.

Maybe that's the challenging question. Do I have what it takes to lose? For, we will lose. In the eyes of the world, on Good Friday Jesus lost.

I'm going to stop here and tell a story about a fictitious character, a rancher from South Texas. I suspect some of you know the story having read the book or seen the movie. There is a little violence in the story, and it's not my intent to glorify violence, but Jesus himself did use “waging war” as an example.

Again, it's not a historical event, not historically factual, but it is a true story about Texas (at least the Texas in which I was born and raised; time will tell if it's still true). It's the saga of a South Texas ranching family named the Benedicts; Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor, and James Dean star in the movie named “Giant.”

Bick Benedict is a proud man. He is proud of the Benedict name and all that it stands for. As the story goes, one night at the grand opening of a big new hotel in Houston, a rival oil man and, also, the owner of this brand new hotel embarrasses the Benedict family. The rival and new hotel owner refuses service to Bick Benedict's daughter-in-law and his grandchild, as they are of Mexican heritage.

This is 1950s Texas. With great dramatic flair Benedict confronts his rival in the hotel grand ballroom, and fights for the family name, successfully winning a fist-fight in front of “all of Texas.” It's a triumphant moment for Benedict, and everybody who is anybody is there to witness it.

Benedict feels pretty proud of himself about this, until – that night – when his motives are exposed by his own son. His son argues vehemently and correctly that Benedict was fighting for the family name more than he was fighting for his daughter-in-law – more than he was fighting for justice.

Perhaps, after a night of reflection it was a changed man – the next day – who drove the women and children back to his South Texas ranch. Perhaps in that one revelation or epiphany, Benedict encountered and confronted his high need for the respect and adoration of others, and his arrogance, and maybe even his racism. But what follows is for me one of the most memorable scenes in movie history.

Sarge's Café, a roadside café somewhere between Houston and the South Texas ranch. Already, you likely have a mental picture of Sarge, the owner and cook: straight out of central casting, big, yet lean; crew cut; short sleeves rolled up over his biceps.

Bick Benedict and the whole family enter the café. With great reluctance, Sarge allows ALL of the Benedicts to be served. After all, they are Benedicts. But when another family of Mexican heritage happens to enter the café, Sarge begins to run them out of his establishment. He is intercepted by Bick Benedict, a rugged rancher to be sure, a tall Texan, but a man my age. Benedict calculates the cost. In a flash he asks himself, "Do I have what it takes to lose?" – for Sarge is a much younger, much stronger man.

The predictable fight ensues. One last punch is thrown. Benedict is on his back, of course. And Sarge drops a sign on Benedict's chest, the all-familiar sign which reads: "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone."

Bick Benedict lost. Or so it seems. We move to the last scene of this saga. Bick and his wife, Leslie (played by Elizabeth Taylor), are relaxing in the living room, gazing upon two toddler grandchildren – first cousins. One has blonde hair and blue eyes. One has black hair and brown eyes and brown skin. Reflecting on their life together, Leslie tells her husband of her proudest moment, the proudest she's ever been of her powerful, successful, rancher-turned-oilman husband, was the day he laid flat on his back in Sarge's Café.

Maybe sometimes when we lose, we win.

Jesus of Nazareth travels to Jerusalem. He will be tempted to succeed, to win, to emerge powerful, victorious – triumphant. Thank heavens, he has what it takes to

LOSE – the vulnerability, the humility, the faith to lose. Thank God, he loves us enough to lose for us.

The story of the Benedicts ends with two toddler cousins in a play pen. So, we don't know if Bick Benedict had further epiphanies, and used his influence to challenge the systemic injustices of South Texas. We don't know if he ever grew to understand that racism is systemic, and something more than bigotry. We don't know if he ever came to understand that he was actually born on third base, and was not a "self-made man." The term "white privilege" was not in the vocabulary. We don't know if he ever practiced non-violent peaceful resistance.

Time will tell if this mythological personification of Texas will lead the way toward building bridges or building walls. But, we do know that one night his son cracked open his heart, and for one moment, Bick Benedict had what it took to lose ... for someone else – someone he didn't even know, someone different, a vulnerable family on the margins.

From the time we went to seminary to this very day, it seems that the institution has asked if we had – and have – what it takes to win: discernment committees, commissions on ministry, calling committees, vestries, foundation boards, and all those with fiduciary responsibilities – all important committees served by faithful Christians, of course. The institution serves the movement, right?

But what they really want to know from you and me, I believe, is the same question the world has for the Body of Christ, of whom we are living members called more to humility, and vulnerability, and service than to pride, and power, and triumph. What people want to know – what Mexican immigrants, and Syrian refugees, and Ferguson African-Americans, and the people of Flint, Michigan, and powerless and hopeless people everywhere want to know is this: will we love them? Will we love them enough to lose for them, or lose with them?

I believe we are here today because the Church hopes, and the world hopes, and God believes we do have what it takes. And when we don't, God does. Because what it takes is love – the love we strive to proclaim and embody in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.