**Take Up Your Cross** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Second Sunday in Lent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 22:23-31; Mark 8:31-38 Saint Paul, Minnesota
February 25, 2024

I’ve been wondering who would be a good patron saint for this season of Lent in which we find ourselves. The obvious candidates are those paragons of *frugality* (self-denial) who learned to live without a steady income or the comfort of regular meals. *St. Francis,* who threw off his clothes and took to the streets, alms bowl in hand, comes to mind. So does *St. Clare.* She had hoped to follow Francis into the mendicant life, but ended up in a monastery for which she wrote a rule so austere that the pope wouldn’t let her live by it.

These saints teach us about the freedom to love and serve that opens all around us when we divest ourselves of extraneous goods, *a lesson we need to learn in both good times and bad.*

Of course, this is very counter-cultural; very un-American!

However, I think what we need in these conflicted and uncertain days is a saint who was a *big spender*—*not a profligate spendthrift* willing to spend others’ money in order to enrich herself, *but a big spender intent on creating and sustaining the communities she believed the world could not do without.* For the patron saint of this conflicted and divided time, I nominate *St. Hedwig.*

You may be thinking—wow, how great! They’ve canonized Harry Potter’s owl! She did, after all, lay down her life for her friends in that last book in the series. No, not *that* Hedwig, although J. K. Rowling knows her hagiography and no doubt named Harry’s snowy owl for St. Hedwig, who is often remembered as the patron saint of *orphans.*

Hedwig’s story reaches us like a whisper from the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Her biographers claim she was given in marriage at the age of 12 to Henry I of Silesia (which straddles Poland and the Czech Republic), in order to strengthen political alliances with Germany. She bore Henry seven children, and her story might have ended there, as it did for many women of her time who married young and spent years bearing and caring for children.

But Hedwig was strong, and she had a clear idea about what she wanted to do with her access to power and resources: she wanted to create and sustain communities centered on *prayer, learning and service.* She urged Henry to provide land on which monasteries and hospitals could be built, and to create endowments which could sustain them. Henry did. Together they brought Augustinians, Cistercians, Dominicans—monks and nuns of all kinds—to Germany and Silesia. Together they built hospitals for people with leprosy in Breslau and Neumarkt.

These were not simply the charity projects of a wealthy lady. Hedwig participated in these communities as well as supporting them with land and money. She worked in the hospitals she and her husband founded, and when he died, she didn’t waste a moment before moving in with the Cistercian nuns. (She had convinced Henry to join her in the monastic vow of chastity after their seventh child was born).

Something in these communities—something in their vision of how life could be lived—answered a question deep within Hedwig. *What was that question?* I’d guess it was something like: *How can I live my life close to God and the needs of others?* Married at 12, constantly pregnant, for years she kept alive a vision of community in which even women have time for prayer and study; a vision in which work is shared so that leisure can also be shared; a vision in which everyone receives the attention and care he or she needs.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is interesting because Jesus, in this week’s Gospel reading, presents his followers with a *big theology*, intended to inspire them to become *large-hearted people.* Jesus’ seminar in practical theology aims to awaken them to the relationship between their theological beliefs and their ethical commitments.

Specifically, he invites them to consider their beliefs about God and about his own mission as God’s representative—and to consider how these beliefs are connected to their understanding of leadership and power; like St. Hedwig.

You see, Jesus wants his followers to consider the *nature* of his Messianic vocation. Jesus describes his vision—rooted in the *“suffering servant”* of Isaiah—by asserting that the Messiah must suffer and be killed. The initially perceptive Peter, still committed to traditional Messianic theologies, denounces this vision, leading to Jesus’ rebuke: Peter is focused *“not on divine things but earthly things.”*

Jesus then poses a *countercultural* understanding of divine power as *relational and sacrificial.* Alfred North Whitehead asserted that God is the fellow sufferer who understands. Less than two decades later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated that only a suffering God can help. Such visions counter our images of God as all-powerful and all-judging. They also challenge images of a distant and apathetic God, untouched by the pain of the world.

Process theologian Bernard Loomer described two kinds of power: *unilateral and relational.* Unilateral power builds walls, silences opposition, decides without consultation, and separates the world into us and them. It is willing to destroy the world in order to save a handful of sycophants. Bullying and bloviation characterize unilateral power.

In contrast, relational power leads by empathy, inclusion, listening, and receptivity. It transforms the world by a dynamic process of call and response, of adjusting—as good friends do, and parents—to the experiences of others. God saves the world by love and not coercion, by embrace and not alienation.

Jesus, however, is not finished with his lesson. His words become even more *countercultural:* discipleship, too, is relational and sacrificial. Our theology ultimately shapes our actions. We become like the gods we image. The worship of a god whose power is unilateral often leads to theological and interpersonal bullying, to prioritizing dogma over relationships, and to the marginalization of the other. This *threatening god’s followers* assume that anyone who opposes their platform is an infidel, unworthy of ethical consideration. Such leaders win the theological and ecclesiastical world at the cost of losing their souls.

On the other hand, relational visions of God encourage *partnership, creativity, and inclusion* as avenues for transformation. The quest for truth involves seeking the well-being of all, not a favored few.

And so, inspired by his embodiment of a relational God, immersed in suffering, Jesus challenges his followers to ***take up their crosses*** and embrace the pain of the world. Contrary to the world’s focus on individual success, Jesus asserts that those who hang onto their lives will lose them, while those who are willing to lose their lives will experience God’s blessing. *This is not a matter of martyrdom so much as the choice to jettison the isolated ego in favor of a wider loyalty.* Our self-serving attempts at domination lead to losing our souls. Jesus challenges us to become *big spirited* in our spiritual and relational lives, drawing circles that embrace all creation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In Preaching the Gospel of Mark, *Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm,* fills in the contours of this cruciform-shaped life*: "To*deny oneself*is to place Jesus' priorities, purposes, and path ahead of our own;* to**take up the cross***is to be willing to suffer the consequences of faithful living; to*follow him*is to travel to unknown destinations that promise to be both dangerous and life-giving."*

Expounding on this truth, Bernard Loomer believed that theological reflection is worthless if it lacks intellectual, emotional, and spiritual *stature*. In his influential essay “S-I-Z-E is the Measure,” Loomer explains:

*By size I mean the stature of a person’s soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness.*

Loomer was clear that the future of a church, nation, or planet depends on the cultivation of large-souled pastors, business leaders, and politicians. Sadly, it seems that many leaders instead race to *constrict* their worldview, imagination, and sense of responsibility for others.

For example, the Buddhist tradition speaks of the *bodhisattva* as a person of stature. Bodhisattvas postpone their entry into Nirvana to return to Earth with the mission of bringing enlightenment to every wayward soul. *In similar fashion,* the New Testament speaks of the youthful Jesus growing in wisdom and stature and favor with God and humankind. *Spiritual growth* means opening to greater suffering—not just for Jesus and the bodhisattva, but for us. As we grow spiritually, we move from apathy to empathy. Other people’s pain becomes our pain; other people’s joy becomes our joy. As Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12, we suffer together or rejoice together.

Christian formation also promotes large-spirited people. Unfortunately, stunted spiritualities and theologies are widespread in today’s world. But the prophetic message, embodied in *Jesus, Amos, Hosea, and others*, involves sensitivity to God’s suffering in the suffering of creation. God is not apathetic. Absolute self-sufficiency does not describe the God of the prophets or Jesus Christ. As philosopher Charles Hartshorne asserted, God is the *“most moved mover.”* God’s love is unwavering, but divine love plunges God into the maelstrom of creaturely suffering.

Empathy then, is a spiritual and ethical virtue at the heart of our faith, and congregations are challenged not just to talk about expanding the circles of empathy—and experiencing the suffering of others—*but to find ways for congregants to face others’ suffering without emotionally shutting down or experiencing burnout.* Some days the pain of the world is just too much to fathom, and we need spiritual anchors to strengthen us for the long haul—along with the immediate pain and suffering we encounter in responding *to “the least of these.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Which brings us back to St. Hedwig.

Hedwig left behind no written texts for us to study. She left only the work of her hands, the fruits of her powers of persuasion, and her vision of what community can be when we pray together and turn to one another in love. In that way, I think, she is a bit like Harry Potter’s owl. I imagine her sailing in through the windows of our churches with her wings outstretched. I imagine her landing on our communion tables and altars, our pulpits, and pews. I imagine that she has a letter in her beak, and it is addressed to us.

Hedwig has a message for us: *if we long for communities devoted to prayer and study, communities in which needs are met with compassionate attention, we are going to have to build and sustain those communities ourselves.*

There’s also another message: *Spiritual practices undergird social action.* Accordingly, socially active congregations must make spiritual practices essential to their mission. There is no division between prayer and protest, between spirituality and social concern. Contemplation deepens our spirits and broadens our sensitivities. Action expands the scope of our spiritual sensitivity. And God can enlarge our hearts to see God’s presence in every human and all creation, and to respond with grace and compassion.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In short, in God’s world, *sacrifice* brings blessing, and *relationship* trumps ideology. Losing our isolated, fearful selves leads to a world of beloved friends. It’s a lesson our society desperately needs to learn. The church, at its best, is uniquely situated to provide space to practice this alternative way of being, as well as a lived example. May it be so. Amen.

1. Stephanie Paulsell, *“A Saint for Hard Times: Saint Hedwig,”* The Christian Century, April 7, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bruce G. Epperly, *Jesus’ Lesson in Large-Hearted Theology,* The Christian Century, August 29, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bruce G. Epperly, *Enlarged Hearts,* The Christian Century, September 14, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)