Proverbs 1:20-33

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

If you are a lover of the sunrise – and your time and lifestyle permit it – I recommend that you take advantage of this time of year. It is perfect. I like to sit outside, in the dark, with my steaming cup of morning coffee. The sky is painted with stars. This time of year the sun inches up, slowly blotting out the stars. They’re still there; we just can’t see them.

This time of year – maybe it’s just this month – the morning air is a wonder. It doesn’t move, but it’s not really still either. That’s a paradox. How two opposing things can exist at the same time in the same place.

Our lives probably have more paradox in them than we really ever stop to consider. For example, we love but we also hate. That’s not a very nice thing to admit in church, on Sunday, but if we are really honest with ourselves we have to admit that we all know something about hatred.

The great 20th century mystic Thomas Merton is the only Christian author I have ever encountered who wrote openly about hating. Maybe that was a demon with which he wrestled. He had a sublime relationship with God – deep union – he was deeply loving but he, too, had his issues.

Jesus talks about paradox today. He says that in order to live, you must die. And in order to follow him, you must carry around with you your very means of death: the cross. Rather grim, isn’t it, given that the cross is an object of suffering and pain? And execution.

And yet, who wouldn’t want to follow Jesus? I love him. I love everything he stood for. Peace between enemies. Love between neighbors. Forgiveness between each of us when we inevitably hurt one another.

And that is just Jesus 101. It doesn’t even take into account how he was a pure, uncluttered conduit of God’s transcendence. How he *is* a pure conduit of God. In him is unfathomable love. Knowing him, to any degree, is knowing God.

The spiritual life is one of paradox where dying means that you can truly live. I remember reading the story of a young man whose house burnt down. All was lost – fortunately there was no loss of life. But all his belongings – books and photo albums, sports gear and memorabilia, clothing and so on – was gone. A friend consoled him by expressing sympathy for his loss. But he said, no, condolences were not in order because now he was free. The “death” of his possessions freed him up for a different kind of life.

I think we all know in some part of our brains that to truly live means to die “little deaths.” Some unconscious part of us knows this is true. Die to worry. Die to striving and competing and accumulating. Die to all the fears we have about our future and our present! But death violates every survival instinct bred into us.

So we struggle. The best parts of us struggle with the worst parts. Just like our brother Thomas Merton. That’s one kind of suffering. It is the universal suffering of all people who want to live intentional lives; who want to be their best selves.

There’s another kind of suffering. It’s what Jesus refers to when he says pick up your cross – that ugly instrument of pain. He is talking about happens to you when you love so much that it hurts. It hurts to see others in need and in pain. It hurts to see the effects of injustice on people, and of pollution on the Creation. If you love much, like Jesus, it means you will suffer much.

If we want to follow Jesus, then we will want to do something about the pain of the world. Like he did. Last week we found him healing the daughter of a Syrophoenician woman after initially rebuffing her. He went on from there to a blessing spree. We’re more accustomed to hearing about killing sprees nowadays; Jesus was on a blessing spree.

Departing from the Syrophoenician woman he healed a deaf man, then a blind man. He fed a crowd of four thousand from very little. Everywhere he went – to villages, cities or farms – they laid the sick on mats who begged to touch even the fringe of his cloak. All who did were healed. [Mark 6:56].

A lot happens in the life of Jesus between this blessing spree and the end of his public ministry. But go there for a moment. He says something at that endpoint that has always puzzled me. He said, “You who believe in me will do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.” [John 14:12]. That’s hard to imagine! What’s greater than healing the deaf and blind, feeding the hungry and curing all manner of ills?

Today there are all kinds of assisting technologies for the deaf and blind; government food programs for the hungry and a vast health care system for curing all manner of ills. But today there is also a level of complexity and advancement unimaginable in the time of Jesus, posing problems that are dense and difficult to resolve.

You don’t have to think very hard to come up with one or two. The possibility of mutual destruction comes easily to mind, by means of weapons of mass destruction. The tension between destroying our planet even while we are utterly dependent upon it for our survival. The issues attendant upon technology: do we use it or does it – as increasingly seems to be the case – use us?

Perhaps wrestling with and resolving these issues are the greater works that Jesus had in mind for us to do. Perhaps what he had in mind was that although any one person can go on a blessing spree, to resolve modern problems we need more than one.

We need community. We need to evolve – spiritually – to the place where the whole of us together is much greater than the sum of any of our parts.

That’s the kind of spiritual evolution and development to which we are called as 21st century Christians. And it will involve a lot of “cross carrying” to get there.

Richard Rohr – author and mystic – says he came of age during the turbulent 1960s. As a young Roman Catholic priest, he was involved in his share of social justice issues, on the liberal side of things. The people on that side liked to call themselves “enlightened.”

Over time, Richard noticed that the “enlightened” protestors were not at all different from those they opposed. There was little to distinguish either side. Both were smugly assured of the rightness of their cause; both were intolerant and impatient; and condescending. That’s when he realized being enlightened wasn’t enough. One needs to be transformed.

We can’t make peace until we become peace. We can’t make righteousness until we are righteous. We can’t preach love and forgiveness until we have so thoroughly practiced love and forgiveness that they radiate out from us, just as they did from Jesus.

The “transformation project” is something that we do together, not alone. We are in this crucible together. Interesting that the word “crucible” – originally meaning a melting pot for metals – comes from the Latin *crux* meaning “cross.”

“Pick up your cross and follow,” says Jesus. This is how we allow the transformative power of God to be at work in us. Embrace it. Allowing God’s spirit to transform you hurts because it means doing things God’s way not our own. That’s a little death. Dying to self. Jesus used the image of the cross to describe this. I use the image of a two-edged sword. Allowing God to have the deepest access to me for the miraculous work of transformation is like embracing a sword that’s razor sharp on both sides.

To the extent that we can each become transformed and can evolve as a community of transformed individuals is the extent that we can do more than even Jesus did. We can do greater works than these, as he said. Go on a blessing spree whenever you feel so inclined, but keep that higher purpose of transformation – whatever the pain – as your long-term goal.