



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 6, 2022
The First Sunday in Lent

Solemn Evensong
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
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A Grain of Wheat—Maximilian Kolbe

You know the story of the two young fish and the older fish?
David Foster Wallace popularized it
In a beautiful and extraordinary commencement address at Kenyon college in 2005.
Two young fish are swimming along, enjoying the day,
An older fish swims up to them, looks at them, smiles, says:
“Hey boys, how’s the water?” Swims away.
The two young fish swim along in silence.
But after a while, one of them turns to the other, unable anymore to hide his perplexity,
And with a puzzled look on his fishy face, he asks:
“What’s water?”
What’s water.
To me, this is a brilliant illustration of,
Of all things,
Original sin.
Dominican priest James Alison speaks of original sin as a way of being, relating, becoming
That is completely death-infected: ordered by, to and for death.
But because it’s so ubiquitous, because we’re so used to it,
Because it’s what we recognize as life-as-usual
We don’t see it at all: don’t see how we’re wrapped up in it and with it,
Shaped by it, undone by it,
In bondage, as St Paul would say, to death-centered patterns of thinking and living
In bondage to sin: we’re swimming in it, it’s our world and we don’t know what it is,
We wonder why it might be that there’s so much unkindness in the world,
So much suffering
So much anguish, hatred, death
And we usually settle on a scapegoat, depending on our personal or political proclivities
—it’s always *their* fault—
and then we go about our lives...
As if in the act of scapegoating itself,
we weren’t in collusion with the death and deadliness we ostensibly abhor;
As if in the rejection of another,
We weren’t constructing ourselves as over-against that other
Making our identities, our sense of self, dependent on their exclusion, even to death,
And further rooting ourselves in the deathly sinfulness

that has frayed at and plagued our humanity
since we played that original blame game in the Garden of Eden as part of our common fall.
“Evil,” Simone Weil writes, “when we are in its power,
is not felt as evil, but as a necessity, even a duty.”
That’s water. That’s the water in which we swim, the world of which we’re a part.
For Alison, we can only see it, recognize it for what it is,
When and as we’re on our way out of it,
Which is to say: when by grace we realize that there’s an alternative,
A different way of being and relating and living and becoming
That looks like a mutuality of self-giving love reaching across all barriers
and into which we are invited, by grace, to grow and flourish.
Answering this invitation, embarking on a movement from death to life
That is inaugurated by grace, supported by grace, and accomplished by grace
Is the movement of transformation of life, of sanctification,
That is at the heart of Christian repentance, practice and discipleship
Which is our intentional cooperation with the grace of God alive in us:
The end of which is growing into the fullness of the likeness of the Lord of Love himself,
Jesus Christ: dying to the world with him who died for us,
We rise with him to share the glorious splendor of his divine life.

I think it’s important to begin with all of that as background and context
In thinking of the life and witness of Saint Maximilian Kolbe
At this beginning of our Evensong sermon series on modern martyrs.
Kolbe’s canonization in 1982 was not without controversy, in part because,
As devout, as he was
He was steeped in, formed by
A culture of nationalism and anti-semitism in early twentieth century Poland.
And this formation is unhappily reflected in his writings for a journal he founded in the ‘20s,
“Knight of the Immaculata”
In which, from time to time, he and other writers
Blamed a conspiracy of Freemasons, Communists, and Jews
For much of the ills besetting the church, the recently independent Poland, and the world.
Knowing what unfolds in the following decades, it’s impossible to see such writings
By him and by others in the community that he oversaw
As anything other than adding fuel to an explosively dark fire of hatred and evil
That would soon break out into the horrors and atrocities of World War II
And to which Kolbe himself would fall victim.
It’s important to name all of this and be honest about it, not only for the sake of truth,
But for the sake of a real understanding of martyrdom and sainthood.
Because to understand Kolbe as a saint
Without being able to speak of real conversion, real repentance, real sanctification,
The transformative power and astonishing work of real grace alive in a real, broken, human life,
Is to render sainthood unintelligible to the human experience at best,
Intolerably fantastical and completely impossible at worst.
The story of Saint Maximilian Kolbe is the story of a conversion to love
Or it is not a story about a saint.

Kolbe was a very religious youth.
Following a vision of the Blessed Virgin when he was 12 in which he reports
Prophetically accepting from Our Lady’s hands a monastic vocation and a martyr’s death,
Kolbe entered a Franciscan seminary a year later,
Made a full profession of vows as at age 20,

And was ordained a priest, 24 years old, in 1918.
In 1927, he founded a new Franciscan monastery,
Called Niepokalanow (City of the Immaculate) about 30 miles outside Warsaw.
He would later go on to found another monastery in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1930,
Returning to Niepokalanow in 1936 in part on account of poor health.
But generally, things were looking good for Kolbe.
The monastery was growing and increasingly important. His ministry was thriving.
And then...
When the Nazis invaded Poland, Kolbe was arrested,
likely for operating a hospital for those wounded in the invasion,
But he was released three months later.
Shortly thereafter, he began using the City of the Immaculate as a shelter,
Going on to protect many thousands of Polish refugees,
Approximately 2000 of whom were Jewish people fleeing Nazi persecution and death.
He encouraged others in the surrounding community
To hide, clothe, and feed Jewish refugees as well, one neighbor reporting:
“When Jews came to me asking for a piece of bread,
I asked Father Maximilian if I could give it to them in good conscience,
and he answered me,
‘Yes, it is necessary to do this because all men are our brothers.’”
For all of his piety and devotion,
It is this love in action that shows:
Kolbe’s conversion to love was well underway.

In February 1941, Kolbe was arrested for sheltering Jews and sent to Auschwitz.
In July, someone in Kolbe’s prison block was thought to have escaped. They had actually died.
But in response, to deter any other escape plans,
The commandant, having assembled the block,
Randomly selected 10 prisoners who would be sent into a prison bunker
To starve to death.
One of the men selected, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out in anguish,
“My wife! My children!”
It was then Kolbe stepped forward,
“I am a Catholic priest from Poland,” he said, “I would like to take his place.”
And he did.
Over the next few days, Kolbe would lead the dying prisoners in hymns and prayers,
And when his companions could neither sing nor pray for exhaustion
Kolbe knelt alone and prayed for them.
After two weeks, most of the men had died. Kolbe was one of the few remaining.
On August 14,
Someone from the infirmary came to the bunker to execute Kolbe and the others
with an injection of carbolic acid.
Mustering what strength he could, Kolbe lifted his arm to gently offer it to his executioner.
He died. The next day, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary,
Fr Kolbe’s body was incinerated in the crematoria.
“I would like,” he had said, “to use myself completely up in the service of the Immaculata...
To disappear, without leaving a trace.”

“Hereby perceive we the love of God,” John writes to us this evening in our Second Lesson,
“Because he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”
Here is the secret of the conversion to love that all saints know,
And which we so often only dimly apprehend, swimming along in our death-centered world:

To love is to put ourselves, all that we are, in the service of another's good,
And to see that good as intimately and immediately our own:
To reach out to the Other, the Stranger, the Victim, the Scapegoated, the Blamed
To reach out across all perceived difference
To stand with another, in their place...
In the same way that God put all that he was, all that he had, all that he loved,
The infinite fullness of the Godhead
The One Word by which God speaks Godself and all Creation,
His own burning heart of Love
In the service of our good
In Jesus Christ;
In the same way that God in Christ wondrously and inexplicably
Identified with us, our good with his, and sought the good for us,
When we were strangers to goodness
Emptied himself
Reaching out across all difference:
From Heaven to Earth, from Infinite Immortal Almighty Creator to finite mortal frail creature,
And stood with us, in our place.
If this is our example of love, as John says it is, as Jesus shows it is:
Ought we not to go and do likewise?
Jesus tells us: "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark xii.31)
This isn't an invitation to have pleasant feelings toward our neighbor
Analogous to some distantly satisfying sense of self-regard
(that we may or may not manage to muster on any given day):
It's to live, in the thick of it, as if your neighbor *really was you*.
Because they are.
To live as if your neighbor's good was intimately bound up, identical with your own.
Because it is.
It's to live not for ourselves, but for the other,
Because Another lives for us and in us.
"I live," says Paul, "yet not I
but Christ liveth in me." (Gal ii.20)
In Deuteronomy, when God lays out the consequences of following the way of justice,
The way of love, or departing from it,
When God describes the way of life as blessing and the way of death as a curse, he pleads,
"Choose life!" (Lev xxx.19)
Within this context of love and justice, with the example of Christ himself before us,
Whose life ought we to choose if not the life of our neighbor, the life of the Other,
And therein find our blessedness?
Because that is precisely the love with which Christ loves us:
The love that says, "I will take your place in death, so you can take mine in life.
I will become sin for you, so you can be righteous.
I will live for you and in you, so you can live for me and in me.
And share life, together."
This is the love John enjoins us to live. To *live*. In deed and truth.
This is the love across difference to which Maximilian Kolbe was converted.
This is the love that sanctified the life of Maximilian Kolbe
The love to which he was a martyr, a witness, even in the deepest human darkness.
This is the love that longs to convert us, to sanctify us, to make of us living witnesses, too.
The alternative is: well...
It's life as usual.
It's the usual waters of sin and death, hatred, murder, war masquerading as life, care, love:

The sin-sick world in which we customarily and far too easily live and move,
And in which we drown.

Franciszek Gajowniczek, the man for whom Maximilian Kolbe gave his life,
Survived. He remembering that day Kolbe took his place, he said:

“I could only thank him with my eyes.

I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on.

The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live
and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me – a stranger.
Is this some dream?”

No dream. But the reality of God’s own love alive in a human life.

“The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live.”

Would that we all would look to the cross,

And say these words with the same sense of gratitude, awe, and wonder.

“I, the condemned, am to live.”

May Christ’s love in us make us witnesses of love.

May we live that love, following the example of Fr Kolbe:

And share Christ’s life, together.

And may our love, God’s love in us, run through us and the world around us

“like sparks among the stubble”

Until everything we do, everything we are, is brilliantly ablaze with Love’s fierce fire.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ, who liveth and
reigneth with the Father in the Unity of the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.