

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

**LIFE-GIVING**  
***Sermon for St. Lawrence Day***  
LPC, 8/10/14

I have told the St. Lawrence story now many times, so I was going to skip it this year. And then I thought, hey, this is church. We retell the same stories year after year. Our stories give us identity and values. So, brace yourselves, you're going to hear the story of St. Lawrence one more time.

St. Lawrence was a deacon of the church, in Rome, at the time of the Roman emperor Valerian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. The Roman Empire at the time was a mess, with rebellions and plots going on all over the place. Christianity seems to have infiltrated even the upper levels of Roman society by this time and Valerian was determined to put a stop to it.

He arrested the Pope, Sixtus II, and had him and his deacons executed. Lawrence was spared because, as the church's treasurer, he was supposed to assemble the church's treasure and turn it over. Lawrence asked for three days (does that "three days" ring a bell with anyone?) to accomplish this task. Lawrence used the time to liquidate the precious items in the treasury, giving the money to the poor. When asked to present the treasure to the Roman prefect, Lawrence assembled a group of poor people and declared, "These are the treasures of the church!"

The prefect was not amused and arranged a particularly gruesome execution for Lawrence: having him roasted alive on a gridiron. Retaining his legendary humor to the end, Lawrence allegedly told the executioner, "Turn me over, I'm done on this side." Probably because of these associations, Lawrence became the patron saint of both cooks and comedians.

The motto on the front of your bulletin, "Live with Christ and Lawrence," is from a glass medallion from the fourth century that celebrates Lawrence.

Thank God being a Christian is no longer so dangerous! Yet, more than one Christian commentator has remarked on the complacency that so easily sets in with Christians when Christianity is accepted by society. This effect is intensified when Christianity is the established religion, as it became in Rome after Constantine.

However, truly devout Christians remained. With martyrdom unavailable as a way of demonstrating faith, these few sought other radical ways to devote themselves to God. In the post-Constantinian period, many Christians took to the desert, to live in solitude and privation, praying and purifying their souls. This became known as "white" martyrdom, as opposed to the "red" martyrdom of literally dying for Christ.

To a modern sensibility, these excesses seem somewhat pointless. I mean, what good did these people actually do?

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My doctoral research suggests that they *did* do good. Shawn Madigan compares early desert monasticism to a protest movement. People who took to the desert were demonstrating that human society was on the wrong track, out of right relationship with God. The desert fathers and mothers also supported others in the faith, providing spiritual direction and encouragement. Several left writings that continue to inspire the faithful today.

What emerges from their stories is that martyrs, whether red or white, whether they actually died for Christ or dedicated their lives to him, have something in common. The word “martyr” simply means “witness.” What these witnesses have in common is that they are people to whom Christ means everything.

What is our faith worth to us? Few if any of us is going to be asked to give our lives for Christ. What would we give up for him? I don’t ask this so that we can compare ourselves against the red and white martyrs and feel bad because we are neither dying for Christ nor sitting on a pole in the desert. I wonder if we can think and pray about the worth our faith has for us. What Christ means for us. How much of a priority our faith is. What, if anything, in our lives pales in comparison.

What I am groping toward is not dwelling on what we can’t do, and what doors are closed to us, but contemplating what we can do, and what doors are open to us.

The desert fathers and mothers could no longer witness to Christ by being voluntarily roasted, so they took to the desert to witness to a life that radically prioritizes prayer over material concerns.

I don’t really see that taking to the desert is a viable alternative for us today. But there are other ways for us to witness to Christ. We may not be able to give our lives to the flames or the desert, but we can give more of our lives to the kingdom of heaven behaviors taught and demonstrated by Jesus: forgiving each other, loving our neighbors as ourselves, working for justice, being a healing presence and feeding the poor.

Our lives are ours to give to that which we value most. What is it we value? How much do we actually value Christ in our lives?

Then ---What doors are open to us?

I conclude with a prayer by Gabrielle Hadington:

*O Lord Jesus our God/ Who called people from their daily work/ Saying to them, “Come ye after me,”/ May your children today hear your voice/ And gladly answer your call/ To give their lives to you/ To serve your Church/ And give their heart/ To you only./ Bless their hopes/ The first tiny stirrings of desire/ The little resolve to go forward/ The small vision of what might be./ Deal gently with their fears/ The hesitation of uncertainty/ The darkness of the unknown/ The lack of confidence in their own capacity/ And turn it all to trust in you.*