

9 August 2017
Commemoration of St. Laurence

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“Life in Christ”

Text: Mark 8:34-38; Revelation 6:9-11

St. Laurence knew the Church is not an institution. It is not a building. It is not a thing. St. Laurence knew that the Church is the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ. A building not of dead stones, but of living, breathing, bleeding stones, built on the living, breathing, and bleeding cornerstone named Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4-6).

That’s why, as tradition says, when Laurence was brought before the prefect of Rome and told to turn over all the treasure of the Church to the Roman treasury, Laurence didn’t bring silver or gold or the keys to a building - he brought people. He brought the disabled and sick. He brought the poor - those the Church had helped and touched; those who had become the living stones of the Church. And he said: “Here are the Church’s treasures.”

The Roman prefect was not amused, but Laurence wasn’t trying to amuse him. Living in the midst of a time of great persecution, Laurence knew that doing this would get him killed. Martyred. But he had to do the truth. And he knew that while the Roman government could kill him, it couldn’t take his life. For his life was safe in Christ (Colossians 3:3). He had already died with Christ and been raised with Christ in Holy Baptism (Romans 6). So he was bold. The Roman prefect counted on fear to get what he wanted. But fear was not the currency Laurence dealt with. Love was. The love of Christ for him, the love of Christ given to him, the love of Christ he now, as a deacon of the Church, gave to others.

And when love is your currency and not silver or gold, you see things differently. You see as Jesus saw. And you see the Church not as an institution, or a building, or a thing, but as the people. For you don’t lay down your life here for an institution, a building, or a thing. You lay down your life here when you know that you’ve already been given a life that cannot be taken away. When the love you’ve received is far greater than the love you could ever give. Receiving a love like that changes you.

For Laurence, like you and I, was not born this way, ready to give his life for Christ and the Church. By nature we cling to our lives in this world. We cling to the stuff of this world. It’s what we know. But Laurence, like you and I, was *re*-born; given a new life; a new life in Christ Jesus. And when he was re-born in Holy Baptism, he was changed. He was raised. From one life to another. From an earthly life to a spiritual, heavenly life. He looked the same, but was really a new man. A new man who knew that it didn’t profit him anything to save his life in this world and forfeit his soul. A new man who knew that

losing his life in this world meant saving it for eternity. A new man who was not ashamed of a crucified Saviour, and so was not ashamed of those his crucified Saviour came to save - the poor, disabled, and sick; the down and out; the low and unwanted. Jesus wanted them, and that was good enough for Laurence. The things of this world - no matter how great and strong and glorious they look - are passing away. But the One who died and rose again could not pass away again. Not ever. And Laurence, by virtue of his baptism, belonged to him.

That's how it worked in ancient Rome. If you were a Roman soldier, you were marked as such. You belonged to Rome and to your regiment. Laurence had been marked, as you have been marked - with the sign of the cross - and he would not rebel against the one he belonged to: his Saviour.

So when he was summoned, he did what was right; he did the truth, even though he knew it would mean losing his life here in this world. He knew God was not against him nor had left him, but that he would be privileged to be one of those we heard about from Revelation tonight - one of those souls under the altar, slain for the Word of God and the witness they bore. God knows exactly the number of that great company, a number being added to even today as Christians are killed for refusing to deny their Saviour. Or maybe better to say, as Christians are *given life* for refusing to deny their Saviour.

We admire men and women like Laurence. For doing what they did. For their courage and faith.

But while we admire men and women like Laurence, we *worship* the one far greater than he. The one who looked at this world full of the poor, disabled, sick, down and out, low and unwanted; rebellious sinners going their own way; infected by sin and dying, and who loved us anyway. Who saw people unworthy of His time, unworthy of His love, unworthy of His doing anything for us . . . and He came anyway. Not because of who we are, but because of who He is. Because of His love that surpasses anything we can ever imagine. And so He came and gave His life for you. That you be no longer poor, disabled, sick, down and out, low and unwanted, but that you be a child of God. And He gathers you in Baptism, He feeds you with His Body and Blood, He absolves you of your sin, and He takes you to His Father, and says: "Here are your treasures." And unlike the Roman prefect, the Father is well pleased. This is exactly what He wants. You.

And knowing that, believing that, you too can be a Laurence and see as Jesus sees. And not only that, but do and speak as Jesus too. And see others, unworthy as they are, as folks to love and help and go out of your way for. Not because of who they are, but because of who you now are - a new man, a new woman, in Christ. It won't be easy and it may not be popular or pleasant, and as Laurence found out, it may cost you your life. But as Jesus said: ***whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*** Like Laurence, you have a life that cannot be taken from you; a life safe in Christ. So you can

live, without fear. You can live in love. You can live because whatever you need, you have. In Christ. In the one who gave His life for you, and gives His life to you. And when you have His life, you truly have everything.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.