

*Sermon for Palm Sunday, Year C*  
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*Holy Nativity, Plano*  
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“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,” who, being God, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and became obedient unto death. As we remember the Passion of our Lord today, St. Paul reminds us that his Passion is the pattern of our life. Life follows death, not the other way round. We must die to those desires that are not God’s desires, and we must die to our methods of achieving those desires. Jesus was obedient unto pain, humiliation, and death. And so “obedience unto death” must be our goal and our battle cry.

The parish I formerly served was a blessing to us in many ways. It also provided housing for us. This was not a particularly happy arrangement. Among other things, our house was separated from the parish dumpster by perhaps twenty feet and a single line of trees. But one of the amusements afforded our girls in that house was to watch out the dining room windows, as the local squirrels would drag themselves slowly along the top of our picket fence, after gorging themselves at the dumpster. The girls called them “fat, happy squirrels”. Those squirrels didn’t have to forage for food. They never went hungry. But they lived mostly on garbage. I don’t think they could have found food at all without the dumpster.

My friends, we are like those squirrels. The direct analogy is obvious. We don’t have to forage for food. We never go hungry. And we live mostly on garbage. But there is another analogy I’d like to draw, that I think is even more important. Think of our spiritual lives. Just as a normal squirrel has natural behaviors he exhibits, like foraging and storing and nesting, so a normal Christian has natural behaviors too. Like prayer, fasting, mutual support in community, study of God’s Word. And these disciplines add up to a life of obedience.

“Obedience unto death” is not an empty phrase in the modern world. It is no abstraction. The twentieth century saw more Christian martyrdom than all the previous Christian centuries combined. After Lenin came to power in Russia in 1917, millions of Christians were eventually slaughtered, because the church stood as a threat to the communist state. The rise of the axis powers in the Second World War brought many Christians into conflict with the state. Some are famous, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Others are not, like Lucian Tapiede, an Anglican teacher and evangelist who was killed with other missionaries during the Japanese invasion of Papua New Guinea. That doesn’t count all the other Christians who died in Nazi camps for challenging the inhumanity of the regime. In China, another Marxist state has been oppressing Christians for the last fifty years. No one knows how many real Christians there are in China, because it has

gone mostly underground. In Uganda, Anglican Archbishop Janani Luwum was among the people murdered for challenging Idi Amin's regime in the 1970s. And across the world, Islamic jihadists threaten Christians whenever the two religions clash. Murder, rape, arson, beatings, kidnapping, and imprisonment are all very real, daily possibilities in the lives of normal Christians from El Salvador to Cuba, from Nigeria to Sudan, almost all of the middle east, almost all of Asia, including Indonesia and the Philippines.

For Christians in these parts of the world, "obedience unto death" is a way of life. The fact that Jesus, the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity, took the form of a slave and submitted to death for them gives them the power to go on. For them, to live is Christ. Otherwise, they wouldn't bother with him.

We, on the other hand, are the fat, happy squirrels of the Christian world. We gorge ourselves on Oprah, football, and the leavings of our spiritual forebears. Our religion is prepackaged, just like our food, and doesn't require any real effort. And then we wonder why our children don't believe.

I'm not suggesting that we should go out and seek persecution for its own sake. What I am suggesting is that we must empty ourselves in the pursuit of God's will. We must do what is right, rather than what is convenient. And that think long and hard about whether we are a living part of the same body as those people suffering and dying for Jesus around the globe. Or are we dead flesh? Or worse, a cancerous growth?

In any case, the way to being a living part of that body is to follow our Lord to the cross, to put to death in us everything that is not of him, and to serve others rather than ourselves.