

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, today is the holiest of days, the greatest of days, the scariest of days, for what this day fully means is beyond our understanding. We recognize it every year, indeed, every day of our lives but its power is greater than we often realize. Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again to a greater reality. The Lord of the Universe could not stay down, and, by your power and encouragement, we should not either. Holy God, we are surrounded by many obligations, distractions, sorrows, those of the present and those of a lifetime, sorrows of our own doing and those we cannot control. We offer ourselves and prayers to you this Easter morning in hopes to be continually be transformed by your Holy Spirit as people who love more fully, who give more fully, who walk in Christ's light. Hear us, O God.

Gracious God, we seek to receive these gifts you have offered us: the gift of new life through Christ's resurrection, a newness beyond our imagination. And yet, God, we know we shouldn't just accept the gift and call it good; we must understand the gravity of this new life. It is not cheap; it is not easy. It is a choice. It requires us to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and when we do, it opens up our reality to the many possibilities of life everlasting now and to come. Help us God, in the easy-going times and in the times where goodness is hard to see, to walk that difficult but worthwhile path. Help us, in the times when all we see is the manure, to know that from the struggles and the pains a beautiful flower of new life eventually sprouts. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of life and death, Jesus the Christ, who calls us to new life in the words of the prayer he taught us, saying...

## SERMON

What does a beautiful flower take to grow? There's water, dirt, sunshine, but what you really need is a lot of fertilizer. Put simply, a lot of poop, excrement, dung, compost.

Let's be honest, this sermon can start to get pretty ripe with all the ways we can talk about that stuff, all those four letter words, from "crap" to that four-letter word starting with "s." You all know what I'm talking about. That there is what my late grandmother used to call "Farmer's Language," and that is what farmers might easily call that stuff. They have to work with it all the time. But let's just settle on "manure." Boy, do farmers need a lot of manure, and boy, does that manure stink. Today, my parents are with us, and my father still helps his brother, my uncle, on his farm. My wife knows all about the farm's output and asked if she could get some of that dark dirt, that rich, manure-laden dirt, God's very own version of Miracle-Gro, to re-pot some of her plants. From experience, I can tell you how good that farm dirt is. We put that dirt on a lot we had to reseed with grass when I was young, and man, that was the darkest, thickest, greenest grass I had ever seen. It still flourishes, many years later, thanks to that good rich dirt.

Today, we see the result of the greatest tragedy in history. On Friday, you might have called everything a pile of manure. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed savior, was killed by the Roman State and laid in a tomb. All those hopes and dreams that followed the Messiah seemed to die with him. Three days later, on an early Sunday morning, all that was forgotten. The tomb was empty; he is risen! He offered new life to all those who walk with him. In retrospect, we might call all the manure of Holy Week...well, "holy crap." It was bad at the time, but it was redeemed in the ultimate outcome that Sunday. In all seriousness, resurrection and God's new life comes at a very high cost. Indeed the very definition of resurrection requires death. One cannot rise from the grave unless one gets in the grave in the first place. We probably will never understand all the manure Jesus went through to rise again that Easter morning. We have the same opportunity with a twist. God

offers this gift to us right now. We don't just experience new life once you pass beyond the veil; it's a reality here and now. We can live into the resurrection right now, at this very moment, because new life is not a one-and-done. It happens over and over again because life's manure tends to happen over and over again. From that manure, a beautiful flower can grow. Let us see the resurrection through new eyes. Let us see that Christ offers new life to us continually, but it requires a little manure to get us there. It happened to Jesus by necessity, by God's planning, and it happens to us too. Wading through the problems with new life as the focus, we come out of the manure more prepared to live the life Christ offers.

These ideas are pretty clear in our text from the Gospel According to Luke. The scripture begins with the women coming to the tomb at dawn to take spices. They expect to tend to the lifeless body of the Lord waiting there. They are prepared to see the signs of death they left behind on Friday after letting him rest on the Sabbath, but the first sign of something different is the stone of the tomb rolled away. They go in and things get seemingly worse: the body isn't there. This is perplexing, the scripture says. What the heck is happening? But then, all of a sudden, there were two men in white standing before them. Things go from strange to scary, but these men speak words of reassurance. "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." What was is no more; the Lord is not dead but has risen. Resurrection has taken place. But what follows, the explanation of events from these men, is what matters. They tell the women there to remember everything that Jesus said about what was to come. He had said that he must be handed over to sinners, must be crucified, and on the third day rise again. "Oh yeah!" they say to themselves and go back to tell the disciples the incredible news.

The message is clear. New life was not cheap; it required all that came before: all the pain, the struggle, the tragedy, the loss. There is no such thing as Easter without Good Friday. There cannot be resurrection without death. Or, as we might think of it, there can be no beautiful flowers without the stink of manure. But why did God go about it this way? Let's face it, God never works directly or what we would always consider logically. We can't just think our way through how God will work. God works subtly, often hidden, but with purpose. God often goes through the strangest of circumstances to bring God's plans to completion. Hey, if we were in charge, we'd do things differently. Jesus Christ could have marched into Jerusalem that week; actually, he could have come into this world marching with armies ready to kick some oppressive butt. But he never worked that way because that way of going about things is not God's way. The life of Christ shows us the way of God: humble, service-oriented, loving, counter-cultural. The way of Jesus Christ will never be "might makes right," for, as he says, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword," but when we humble ourselves and listen to the more difficult way, the humble way, the loving way, we will find transformation. For Jesus that week and for us going forward, that was the way of self-sacrifice. That allows the beautiful flowers to grow.

If you want an example of what this means, look at this. The greatest example of growing from the manure is this very object. I'm pretty sure you all know what it is, since you are here. This is what we know as the sign of Christianity, what someone wears to identify that they believe in the faith, the object we put on our buildings to show a house of worship. It is none other than the cross on which we recognize Jesus Christ was crucified. But what does the cross mean? To us, it is all those things I said before, but let's go deeper. Rewind about two thousand years and it means something entirely different. It was the

sign of torture, of pain, of state-sponsored execution. It was the sign of something horrible. If you put it into today's terms, how would you like hanging around your neck a syringe for lethal injection or an electric chair? It strikes us deeply and awkwardly when you put it that way. But that's what the cross is: a sign of torture and pain. Our Lord died on one. God used the cross, the greatest sign of torture to bring about the greatest opportunity of new life. It was the manure from which the beautiful flowers of new life came. We have adopted it because through the pain and torture of the cross, God's plans came to be completed. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the King of the Universe, gave himself up on this cross, this sign of torture and death. Through that path, the cross is redeemed for all time. That sign of death becomes a sign of life. Through that manure God intended to plant the Christ within in, new life came about; a flower for all of history sprouted and is offered to us to sprout in our lives. We just have to have the mentality to love and respect the offer.

I heard an interview with former Minnesota Vikings running back Robert Smith the other day, and he had quite the take on his life. He didn't have the most star-studded or easiest of careers. He was often injured and decided to retire in his seventh year as a pro because he wanted to maintain his health. Some were shocked; they would strive for more glory, to get that elusive Super Bowl victory, but his view on the whole shebang was different. He was satisfied. He said that he would not change a single thing that led him to this point in his life, since each experience he had, every setback and every triumph, made him into the man he is today. I think that is a very healthy attitude and worthy of the calling toward new life. We may not feel exactly the way he does when we look back at the many experiences of our lives. We may have some regrets, some words or actions we may want to take back no matter what, but the idea has worth to the Christian focused on the

new life Christ offers. In every part of our lives, from the best to the worst, there is an opportunity to let Christ's new life come forth.

We have all had manure in our lives, some of it we did to ourselves and some of it beyond our circumstances to control. With our lives centered in God, we have a choice on what to do with it. After all, new life is never a requirement. God does not force resurrection upon us; it is always a choice in the big things and the small. It can either stay in the manure, or we can choose to grow some beautiful flowers by using all parts of our experience to choose new life. Let's face it, we were never promised ease throughout life, but we often expect it to be so. Change happens and we get frustrated. Things don't go the way we want each and every day, and we get unhappy. That order at KFC wasn't exactly the way I specified; I mean, I ordered five biscuits and I only got four! That gets me steaming. My drink at Sonic had a bit too much ice, and boy, that gets me riled up. This is the small stuff, but we get so bent up over it. This is manure, but this is manure that is self-imposed. On the other hand, there is the real stuff that shocks us. The sudden loss of a loved one. Difficult news that turns life upside down. Pain and struggle to which there are no good answers. There is a lot of manure in these situations. And yet, as long as we are on this rotating ball, as long as there is still breath in our bodies, from the big stuff to the small annoying stuff, there is room for new life when we choose it. Sometimes it is much easier than others to make that choice, but we are never alone. We can choose to set aside distraction, minor frustration, and the inconveniences of life. We can choose to invest in one another throughout the roughest times of life. We can choose to recommit ourselves to the ideals of God that last forever in loving our neighbor, caring for those who need the most caring, dying to our own desires and living for the Lord of all. In this is resurrection.

Christ calls us to a death at all points in our lives to bring forth the new. It might be a death to the small stuff and be born anew to the stuff that truly matters or it might involve some of the bigger, more complex issues that don't have easy answers. Remember that new life is not an end in itself. New life empowers us to live more fully for the benefit of all God's Creation, just as Jesus' resurrection empowered him to bring about newness for all of creation. In the small things, can we die to the mentality that the inconveniences are so important and foster an appreciation for what really matters? New life is an ever-present reality. If we deny that and keep going on in the same ways, then we invest in the manure and act as if Christ died in vain. Time to grow something new from the manure.

Let's face it, life will hold a lot of manure. Some things are manure-like because they are the worst situations of our lives, like the loss of a loved one, the loss of a home, any major struggle. Sometimes they are manure-like because we can make a mountain out of a molehill, like any inconvenience we make larger than it really is. In any manure-like situation, we can either let it be stinky or we can invite God's calling of new life to make us more like Christ, for the flowers of new life sprout not in doing everything right but where we are called to die a death in selfishness and rise again. The beautiful flowers of new life sprout in the manure of our lives. Look no further than the one we celebrate today. Good Friday was a lot of manure. Christ knew that God's way was not a way of ease but a way of sacrifice and darkness, and that was the only way to bring about resurrection. Christ calls us to the same. So, in the midst of life's manure, it is not hopeless; know that this is the fertile ground for new life to grow. Thanks be to God for the goodness, the manure, and the goodness that only comes through the manure! Amen and Amen.