

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A 2017
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Ever since I learned about her story, I have been fascinated by the life of a woman named Mary Dyer. Some of you may have heard of her. She and her husband fled England in the mid-1600s when the king was cracking down on Anglicans with unorthodox views. She came to the American colonies and became convinced that the teachings of the Quaker form of Christianity were true, worthy, and good—and that they reflected the Biblical witness better than the king's form of Anglicanism. The leaders of the Massachusetts colony where she was living found out she was a Quaker, seized her Quaker literature and banished her from the colony. She fled at first to Rhode Island but quickly defied the ban to return to Massachusetts, where she visited and gave comfort to other Quakers who were in prison for practicing their form of Christianity.

When Mary Dyer defied her banishment, she was captured again and brought again to Boston commons and by the leaders of the colony. She refused to recant of her views, and she refused to stop giving support and succor to other Quakers in prison. The leaders of the Massachusetts colony condemned her to death and placed a noose around her neck. Right before she died, she said this:

This is to me the hour of greatest joy I ever had in this world. No ear can hear, no tongue can utter, and no heart can understand the sweet incomes and the refreshings of the spirit of the Lord, which I now feel.

Mary Dyer was hanged on June 1, 1660. Mary Dyer is the only woman on record to have died in the colonies for the cause of religious freedom, and she is buried in an unmarked grave on Boston Common.

I think one of the reasons that Mary's story stays with me so profoundly has to do with the serenity with which she met her death. She was on the wrong end of a disagreement with the State at the time. She knew the risks of returning to Massachusetts, and yet she died for her religious convictions while at the same time singing a hymn to God at the gallows about the refreshings of the spirit of the Lord that were upon her. What kind of Christian person might have that sort of deep sense of God's presence even in the most harrowing of circumstances? Not me, I don't think. But Mary Dyer certainly did.

I believe Mary and people like her are responding to the promise of Jesus in today's Gospel. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Most of us know this passage in one way or another. It is read at funerals. It is read at ordinations. It was even chiseled over the entrance to the cloisters at my last parish, and I could

read it from my kitchen window in the rectory. And, strangely, we always read this passage when we talk about martyrs of the faith—typically people who have died either tragically or heroically in the service of the church.

Surely that is a little disingenuous to talk about how light a burden it is to follow Jesus when we discuss people who have been martyred? Obviously the burden was not light. It was terrible. And I know that the burden is heavy for those heroes of our faith—Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, Mary Dyer—who have died because the powers of the world were threatened by what they were preaching. But, right at the moment of her death, Mary talks about the wonder and joy of being in with God in the most grievous circumstances.

I don't pretend to understand the mystical communion that a martyr experiences when he or she is with God in the final moments of life. But I will lean on the promise of Jesus in today's Gospel that there are rewards to the struggle. Jesus is promising a life-long accompaniment and a certain closeness with God that is difficult to overstate. And, while I'm no martyr, I will admit to having had moments of love and devotion and awe of God's grace and mercy. And I have felt utterly embraced by a benevolent God. Perhaps you have too. Maybe you have "found rest for your souls" as Jesus says in the Gospel. And in those moments, it is easy for me to believe that those of us who follow God really do carry a light burden and that our following is a joy. Not everyday. But some days. And those days are a gift.

One thing I think Jesus is not saying is that there won't be consequences for following. Of course there will be. Whenever Christians stand up to evil and corruption, evil and corruption take umbrage and lash out. That sometimes ends badly for the Christian, as any quick scan of history will attest. So, Jesus can't be saying that everything will be just peachy. But he does seem to be saying that the rest that we find in God is of an entirely different nature than the distress we find in this world. Union with our God is our birthright as Christians in baptism, and, paradoxically, the lives of the martyrs give us intense examples of this kind of divine love.

I'll be the first to say that leaning into the power of Jesus to find rest and solace is a little mystical for my tastes. But it really is part of our Scriptures and is also part of our tradition. We follow Jesus who is constantly calling us back to God—in the good, the bad, the dangerous, the violent. In every season of this uncertain life, we are gathered into the loving spirit of God. Lay your burdens down. Be fed by the Eucharist. Rest easy in the full knowledge that God is with you every moment, in every situation, from the trivial to the horrific. Jesus simply won't let you go. Amen.