

3.18.2020 Lenten mid-week homily

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

John 10: 7-11, 14:5-6

(Catherine of Siena)

“Christ Crucified, the Bridge”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

The theme of this year’s Lenten mid-week devotion is “Staying Close to Jesus.” In addition to scripture, each week we are focusing on the voice of a Christian writer from the history of the church who also stayed close to Jesus. This week we hear from a woman named Catherine of Siena (1347-1380).

Catherine of Siena was born into a very large family and at age sixteen entered a branch of the Dominicans known as the *Mantellate*, for the black “mantel” or cloak they wore. After taking her vows, Catherine dedicated herself to prayer, penance and works of charity in the world, especially for the benefit of the sick. Eventually, she became the protagonist of an intense activity of spiritual guidance for people from every walk of life: nobles and politicians, artists and ordinary people, church leaders - men and women - including Pope Gregory XI and Pope Urban VI. She negotiated for the reform of the Church as well as for peace during a period of warring Italian city-states.

Catherine is a reminder that even in the most troubled times in world and national history, God continues to bring forth living saints who act as shepherds while pointing to Christ, the true Shepherd of the Church.

In a time when most women did not read and write, Catherine left a rich legacy of letters and theological writings. In 1970 Catherine was named a “Doctor of the Church” by Pope Paul VI. She, along with Teresa of Ávila, were the first women in church history to be given this title.

As we walk the way of the cross during Lent, Catherine offers us an unusual symbol by which to understand Christ Jesus, the Mediator. In her mystical writing known as *The Dialogue*, Catherine wrote of Christ crucified as “the bridge” between heaven and earth. In her vision of Christ, the Son was sent by the Father to guide humanity to heaven by the way of the cross. According to Catherine, human disobedience and sin had so broken up the original path to heaven, that humanity could no longer travel upon it. The original path to God had been washed away by a torrential river of sin in which humanity was drowning. For Catherine, Christ crucified on the cross is the bridge upon which we are invited to climb upon and walk toward the Father’s kingdom. Catherine’s vision is steeped in the language of the New Testament.

In today's first reading, Paul writes "*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*" For Paul, Christ crucified is the power of God upon which we rely and upon which we place our lives. Paul writes of the limitations of human wisdom, pointing us toward the power of divine wisdom that can help us in our daily journeys. During Lent, we remember Christ crucified because the cross is the one place where we see the love of God most clearly. In the cross, in Christ crucified, we see a God who suffers with *and in* our humanity, encouraging us to suffer with and for others. In Christ crucified we see that God has some "skin in the game" of life.

Like us Catherine lived in extremely difficult times. It was a time of war, disease and corruption in both the church and the world. Catherine tirelessly pointed church and secular leaders to the path that can lead humanity by offering a shepherd who suffers with and for others. In her well-known letter to Pope Urban VI, Catherine urged a heavy-handed pope to be a loving and compassionate shepherd in the reforming of Christ's church.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus' disciple Thomas says, "*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" Thomas' words are also our words. We are also looking for the way out of anxiety, the way out of human trial, the way toward the kingdom of God. Jesus' answer to Thomas is also an answer to a humanity constantly beset by challenging rivers of trial that remind us of our broken world and the limitations of human wisdom. Jesus says, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*" During Lent, Jesus reminds us that "the way" to the Father is through the Son. This is the reason why the Son was sent into the world. During Lent we remember that Christ's suffering is redemptive. Jesus came as the way, because the original way to the Father had been washed away by a river of sin.

During Lent, we remember that Christ's suffering leads to resurrection. The cross and the resurrection are two sides of the same coin. The cross is the bridge that mediates this world resurrecting and restoring us to the Father's kingdom. This resurrection reality is always with us every day.

Catherine's life and writings allow us to see someone who found the power of God in Christ's cross. Lent can be a time of new insights and renewal if open ourselves to the power of this cross. We are never alone on our human journey. Christ comes to us daily with the cross, saying "*Follow me.*" Our hands are the hands of Christ in a suffering world. Following Christ crucified, we realize that the crucified hands of Christ become our hands at work in the world. Amen

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

The Dialogue (selections)

I told you that I have made a bridge of the Word, my only-begotten Son, and such is the truth. I want you to realize, my children, that by Adam's sinful disobedience the road was so broken up that no one could reach eternal life. Since they had no share in the good for which I had created them, they did not give me the return of glory they owed me, and so my truth was not fulfilled. What is this truth? That I had created them in my image and likeness so that they might have eternal life, sharing in my being and enjoying my supreme eternal tenderness and goodness. But because of their sin they never reached this goal and never fulfilled my truth, for sin closed heaven and the door of my mercy.

This sin sprouted thorns and troublesome vexations. My creatures found rebellion within themselves, for as soon as they rebelled against me, they became rebels against themselves. Their innocence lost, the flesh rebelled against the spirit and they became filthy beasts. All created things rebelled against them, whereas they would have been kept as I had established it in the beginning. But they stepped outside my obedience and so deserved eternal death in both soul and body.

With sin there came at once the flood of a stormy river that beat against them constantly with its waves, bringing weariness and troubles from themselves as well as from the devil and the world. You were all drowning, because not one of you, for all your righteousness, could reach eternal life.

But I wanted to undo these great troubles of yours. So I gave you a bridge, my Son, so that you could cross over the river, the stormy sea of this darksome life, without being drowned.

See how indebted to me my creatures are! And how foolish to choose to drown rather than accept the remedy I have given! (*D 21*)

But my Son's having made of himself a bridge for you could not bring you to life unless you make your way along that bridge. (*D 22*)

Now you have seen and heard what you asked of me, that is, how you should behave if you would not drown. I have told you that this is the way: to climb up onto the bridge. In this climbing you are all gathered together and united loving each other, carrying your hearts and wills like vessels to me (who give anyone to drink who asks), keeping to the way of Christ crucified with perseverance even till death. (*D 55*)

Rise above yourself. Open your mind's eye and watch how these pilgrims travel: some imperfectly, some perfectly in the way of the commandments, and some most perfectly by keeping and practicing the way of the counsels. You will see what is the source of imperfection. And you will see how deluded is the soul from whom the root of selfish love has not been dug up. No matter what your state in life, it is essential to kill this selfish love in yourself. (*D 56*)

You cannot see me as I am. This is why I covered the divine nature with the veil of your humanity, so that you would be able to see me. I who am invisible made myself, as it were, visible by giving you the Word, my Son, veiled in your humanity. He showed me to you. And this is why he did not say, "I will show you the Father," but, "I will show myself to you." It is as if he had said, "I will show myself to you in accordance with what the Father has given me" (John 14:8-9). So you see, when he showed me, he showed himself. (*D 62*)

Book recommendations:

Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*. (translated by Suzanne Noffke) Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1980. [the definitive translation]

Catherine of Siena, *Writings of Catherine of Siena: The Upper Room Spiritual Classics*. (edited by Keith Beasley-Topliffe), The Upper Room, 2017. [a very accessible selection of Catherine of Siena's writings]

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Catherine of Siena joined the "Mantellate" serving as a tertiary of the Dominican Order (a lay sister). She was a mystic, Scholastic philosopher, and a theologian. She worked to bring the papacy of Gregory XI back to Rome from its exile in Avignon, France, and was sent as an ambassador to negotiate peace among warring Italian city-states. Her letter (*L 291*) to Pope Urban VI is well known both for encouraging the pope to reform the church, but to reform it with compassion and love. In 1970 she was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI. Thirty-six historical figures (including four women) have been named "Doctor of the Church." The other women are Teresa of Ávila, Hildegard von Bingen, and Thérèse of Lisieux. The ELW (p. 87) contains "A prayer of Catherine of Siena."