

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/1/2007, Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
Luke 22:14 — 23:56

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

My opening text for this sermon is a passing event early on in the long passion narrative we have just read. The event takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane. A multitude has come out against Jesus as against a thief, with swords and clubs. They are led by the betrayer, Judas, who greets Jesus with a kiss. Everything is astir. The darkness of the night cannot calm nor obscure the commotion and the anxiety the disciples have for their Lord. Then there is a sudden strike of violence. The text, then, goes this way:

And when those who were about him saw what would follow, they said, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?"⁵⁰ And one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear.⁵¹ But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. (Luke 22:49-51)

Thus, our Lord Jesus permits himself this one last miracle: he heals the man whose ear has been struck off by the sword. Henceforth he will be in the hands of his opponents, interrogated, buffeted, spat upon, scourged, and finally crucified. He *could have* performed another miracle during this awful time of his passion, and it would have been a mighty miracle indeed: he *could have* summoned twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53). They would have rescued him and right well! But Jesus declines that final miracle.

Oh! there is a wonder at play in the passion of our Lord — even a miracle of grace: but the wonder is no longer the spectacular sort of healing a man whose ear has been cut off. It is a more quiet wonder: it is the wonder of self-restraint in the face of injustice. It is the wonder

of refusing to return evil for evil, but rather good for evil. It is the wonder of loving your enemies, blessing them that curse you, doing good to them that hate you, and praying for them that despitefully use you. (Matthew 5:44)

We human beings know of such generosity and self-restraint and are capable of it. Let me bring us back to a story of such generosity amidst a very sad event from last October.

There is an open field in the Pennsylvania countryside where there used to be a school, but that school has been torn down. The news report says this:

The school is no more. At 4:30 am on October 12, while about 25 Amish and others watched, wrecking crews tore down and hauled away the Amish school where the girls were shot. Also torn down were the outhouses, the fence, and the baseball backstop. Originally built in 1976, the site of the West Nickel Mines School is now just an open field. "It was something we had to do," an Amishman said. A new school will be built later at a different location.

You can understand this, I am sure. It was something they had to do, for that schoolhouse had been the site of a heartbreaking deed. The schoolhouse was innocent, of course, but like the innocent field over which Pickett's Charge occurred, too much sorrow is connected with the place to treat it as if nothing had happened.

On Monday, October 2, 2006, a 32-year-old milk-tank truck driver named Charles Carl Roberts entered that one-room Amish schoolhouse at West Nickel Mines, Lancaster,

PA, and killed five girls, aged seven to thirteen, and then he killed himself.

Of all the astonishing features of that tragedy, perhaps the most stunning of them is the report of the grace displayed by the children held captive by the man. I am especially thinking of the Fisher daughters, Marian and Barbie. Marian was older. In fact she was the oldest of the five Amish girls shot dead that day. The ABC news report went like this:

‘Shoot Me First,’ Amish Girl Is Said to Ask
13-Year-Old Tried to Divert Killer From Classmates

By CHRIS FRANCESCANI,
ABCNews.com

Oct. 5, 2006 — The oldest of the five Amish girls shot dead in a Pennsylvania schoolhouse is said to have stepped forward and asked her killer to “Shoot me first,” in an apparent effort to buy time for her schoolmates...What’s more, Fisher’s younger sister, Barbie, who survived the shooting, allegedly asked the gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV, to “Shoot me second...”

I am lifting up this story because it gives us a remarkable means by which to proclaim the most holy Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ on this day, Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion of our Lord. I believe I can phrase the Gospel thus: When the enemies of humanity were staring us down, when sin, death, and the Devil held all the cards and all the guns and were bound and determined to destroy us, then Jesus of Nazareth stepped forward and calmly said, “Shoot me first.” And in so doing, you and I were spared!

Let me return to the story of the Amish schoolchildren, for there is a connection, you see, between Jesus calmly accepting death on that first Good Friday, and what these girls did. The generosity of spirit these girls displayed has its original model in Jesus, whom the Amish,

together with the whole Church adores and counts worthy of our devotion.

There is a website about the Amish called *The Faith of the Amish* (<http://www.800padutch.com/amishfaith.shtml>) The description of Amish faith starts off in a classical Christian way:

Both Mennonites and Amish believe in one God eternally existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Romans 8:1-17). We believe that Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, died on the cross for the sins of the world.

Then the website moves on to anticipate questions that outsiders might have about the Amish, including their belief in non-violence. Let me share something of that very interesting discussion with you. We begin with the question:

“I understand your belief in nonresistance and pacifism. Does this principal extend to personal situations where you are confronted with imminent evil - say a known murderer confronting you and your family in your home? Can you use force to preserve your life in this situation? To what extent? What is the Biblical basis for your position?”

And here is the answer:

“Both Amish and Mennonites are committed to a lifestyle of peace and non-violence. Yes, this pervades every aspect of life. However, no one can predict with certainty how anyone would really react to an absolutely unprecedented crisis such as described above. Emotions as well as thoughts are involved and the situation is personalized. Having said this, we would hope that as people who have practiced a lifestyle of peace, we would not resort to force and violence in a crisis situation such as the one described.

We must briefly make several points:

1. There is no assurance that use of force would save my life or the life of my family if confronted by an attacker.
2. We could recall many accounts of unhopd for deliverances, whether by mediation, nature, or divine Providence, when Christians refused to use force when confronted by an attacker.
3. If the result is death at the hands of the attacker, so be it; death is not threatening to us as Christians. Hopefully the attacker will have at least had a glimpse of the love of Christ in our nonviolent response.
4. The Christian does not choose a nonviolent approach to conflict because of assurance it will always work; rather the Christian chooses this approach because of his/her commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord.

It is the third of these four points with which I want to linger on this Palm Sunday: “If the result is death at the hands of the attacker, so be it...” Rare is the person who can say this and really mean it, because our Maker has implanted in us a love for life. Especially I am thinking how sweet life must have seemed to a thirteen year old child, with her whole life ahead of her and the distinctive innocence of the Amish way of life behind her. If ever there were people on the face of this earth who could greet the day’s dawn with joy, who could find pleasure in the very smell of the dark Lancaster County soil, who knew the comfort of a family and a community who loved her, who still enjoyed the strength of young bones and young muscles, who altogether had reason to cherish her own life, well, I bet these Fisher girls were among such happy people. Yet, they were able to say to the murderer, “Shoot me first. Shoot me second.” The cause of their courage seems to have been pretty clear: they were hoping that the other children could be spared if they suffered death first.

And so it with our Lord Jesus. If ever a person on the face of this earth had reason to cherish his own life — if ever a person had a good life behind him and natural hopes for life ahead, if ever a person had the right to lay his head down on the pillow at nightfall with a clean conscience and no sense of having diminished his life through injustice or sin — well, Jesus of Nazareth was such a man. Yet, when the dark forces that would destroy you had you in their sights, Jesus cried out on our behalf, “No more of this! Shoot me first!”

For as sweet as his own life must have seemed to him, he held your life to be even sweeter.

He stayed his hand, then. He did not summon the twelve legion of angels, he did not pass through the midst of his oppressors as he had done on other occasions, he did not bring down the curtain on this earth as if it were a play on a stage gone bad. He had power to do such things, but stayed his hand from them for a might cause: the cause of human salvation.

It cannot be that you and I have lived in vain! It seems to have broken the mighty heart of Jesus to even imagine that. And so he paid the price that you and I might be spared. It was a wonder of generosity on his part, a miracle of self-restraint for the sake of others. This Jesus is worthy of my devotion and imitation. This Jesus is worthy of yours too.

To our crucified Savior be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.