

Christ the King, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

Ten days ago, the Menard family of Massachusetts was ready to go. They were leaving for a vacation in Florida the next day.

Jason Menard, and his wife Tina, had decided that it was time to take their three children to Disney World. So while the children did some last minute packing, Jason went off to work for one more shift.

Jason worked at the Worcester Fire Department. This athletic, handsome man had been a firefighter for ten years.

That night, a call came in: a fire at a local home. Someone reported that there might be a baby trapped on the third floor of the house. Jason led two of his colleagues into the burning house. They searched the third floor, but the fire and smoke shifted. They had to get out. Now.

The heat and smoke had become intense. The two junior firefighters became disoriented. Jason, the senior officer, managed to think clearly.

He dragged one firefighter to the steps, and sent him to safety. When he found the second firefighter, the stairs were no longer safe. Jason made his way to a window, and forced the other firefighter out.

What happened next isn't clear. Did Jason return to make one more desperate search for the baby? Or, in saving the other two firefighters, had Jason inhaled so much smoke that he could no longer get himself out the window?

On the night of Nov. 13, 2019, firefighter Jason Menard gave his life in Worcester, MA. Everyone agrees on this fact – Jason *could* have saved himself, but he *chose* to save others.

At his funeral Mass, a man stood up to speak. He is the brother of one of the firefighters who were saved by Jason. Through his tears, this man said – “the only reason our family is whole is because Jason refused to save himself.”

That funeral happened last week, but this kind of story happens in almost every generation.

The history of World War II and Vietnam is full of examples of those who could have saved

themselves, but they sacrificed everything in order to save others.

It's also the story of those who sacrificed their lives in the 1850's in Virginia, so that at least a few slaves could be smuggled to freedom. It is the story of those who gave their lives in Europe as they worked to save Jewish people from the Nazis. It's the story of the mom who is thrown overboard off a rickety boat crossing the Mediterranean, seeking to bring her infant to a nation where life is respected.

First and foremost, it is the story of Jesus in today's Gospel. It is the story of the Son of God, hanging on the cross, taunted by religious and political leaders. "Save yourself. If you are who you say you are, save yourself! come down from there!"

This is not the first time that Jesus has faced this temptation.

After his baptism, he goes out into the desert, and there he is tempted. And what does Satan say to him?

"If you are the son of God... feed yourself..."

"If you are the son of God... stop all this prayer and fasting nonsense... use your power..."

"If you are the son of God, jump off this tower and float down to the ground like a snowflake..."

Three times Satan mocks and tempts Jesus with the same words... "if you are the son of God..." And every time, Satan wants Jesus to take his focus OFF of God the Father and OFF of the people whom he had been sent to save. Satan wants Jesus to focus on... himself.

Those mocking words are repeated in today's Gospel: "If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross."

No need to die. You're a miracle worker, so surely you have the power to float down from that cross. You brought Lazarus back from the dead, so surely you have the power to heal a few nail holes in your hands and feet...

Focus on yourself if you are the Son of God.

But, throughout his life, Jesus makes one thing clear: he is sent to save US, not himself. Life was not focused on himself, but on the God who had sent him to save us. "I came to serve, not be served," Jesus said.

Jesus is surrounded by violence and hate in this moment. His life-blood is flowing out of his broken body. He had every good excuse to focus on how much this hurt, how frightening it all is.

But his whole life had been about loving others, saving others, forgiving others. Saving *us*.

If he saved himself, then we would not be saved.

He remains silent through portions of the Passion, until this moment on the Cross. So what he says on the Cross is crucial.

Pay attention to how the two thieves respond to what is happening. One of them picks up the sarcasm and the taunts of the crowd. That thief decides, in his suffering, that he is going to focus on his own pain, and on the shouting, hateful voices in the crowd.

The other thief, in his suffering, does what? *He focuses on Jesus.*

This thief has just a little faith, but he stays focused on the goodness of Christ, even in his suffering. That's what we must do. Turn to Christ in suffering.

Don't look at how small your faith is - look at how great Christ's love is.

Don't focus on how broken your life is – look at Christ.

Don't look at how hopeless it all seems – look at Christ. Like the thief who is promised paradise, we catch a glimpse of hope if we stay focused on Jesus.

If you focus on Jesus, you see the one whom we call Christ, the King. But he is unlike any king the world has ever known. We see one who loves us wildly. He could have saved himself, but he chose to save us through his life, death and resurrection. To paraphrase the words of the man at the firefighter's funeral, "Because of Jesus, the human family can live, and we are whole."

One final thing to ponder this day: here is Jesus, suffering the kind of bodily pain that I cannot even begin to imagine. He doesn't deserve any of it. And what is he doing even as his lungs gasp for breath? He is paying attention to the needs of someone else. A thief hanging next to him, who wants to be remembered. (I get selfish and nasty when I get a cold – I can't imagine how selfish I'd be if there were iron nails in my hands!)

But there is Jesus – his love revealing the Father's love – and instead of being selfish, he is being selfless. He notices the need of the other.

This is our call. Every day, we pray the prayer we learned as children. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

If we listen to Jesus and follow his example, we know that God's will is straightforward.

"Love one another as I have loved you."

"I have given you an example."

"When I was hungry, you gave me to eat."

"Forgive 70 times 7 times."

"Pick up your cross," and help others carry their crosses.

Notice. Notice the needs of your neighbor.

In the end, what does Jesus teach us from the Cross? He teaches us that we do not, we cannot, save ourselves. We have already been saved, by the one who refused to save himself. We cannot save ourselves, so everything we have, now and in eternity, is a gift we don't deserve. It all flows from Christ's goodness.

In him, we see self-giving love. The kind of self-giving love which is occasionally reflected in a fire fighter or sailor or mother. The kind of love the world needs to see, now, from women and men, boys and girls, right here, where Jesus – our broken king – in encountered in the breaking of the bread.

Copyright 2019 by Rev. Michael A. Renninger. All rights reserved.