

Sermon: Martyrs of Sudan
Wednesday May 18, 2011
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Shaker Heights
Delivered at Evensong, Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland
Wisdom 3:1-9; Matthew 24:9-14

What comes to mind when you hear the word martyr? The first thing many of us may think of is the satirical expression, “Oh, what a martyr!” For full effect it is necessary to say this expression with an exaggerated, campy rolling of the eyes and a hand flung up on the forehead. Using the term, “Oh, what a martyr” is to describe a person who is always pointing out just how sacrificial they are on your behalf. They tell you this with a barely disguised sub-text of just how much suffering they are enduring and with a good dash of guilt thrown in for good measure. I call this tactic yanking my chain for sympathy.

I have a dear friend named Eunice in New Hampshire who I refer to as my Yiddische Mama. Whenever she calls me and I am not home she leaves some variation of the following message on my answering machine. “Hello Peter, it’s Eunice. I’m just calling to see how you are? I have not heard from you in such a long time. It’s been a little lonely here, but no need to call back. You shouldn’t worry I’m fine. I just wanted to hear your voice on the machine.”

“Oy Vey!” I think. “I just called you last week, Eunice. You can be such a martyr!”

The reality is being a martyr has meaning beyond this satirical usage; meaning that reaches back to the very origins of our Christian faith and beyond.

The strict definition of a martyr is any person who suffers death rather than renounce their religious beliefs. An example of this would be St. Stephen, the first deacon of the Christian Church, was also the first Christian martyr. According to the Book of Acts he was stoned to death for his faith.

But a martyr is also a person who endures great suffering – possibly to the point of death - on behalf of any belief, principle or cause. The Episcopal seminarian and Civil Rights advocate Jonathan Myrick Daniels would fit this description. Daniels was killed in 1965 near Selma, Alabama as he stepped between a teenage African-American girl named Ruby Sales and a racist deputy sheriff who was about to shoot her.

Yet under this definition Nelson Mandela would also be considered a martyr, or certainly martyr-like. Imprisoned for twenty-seven years because of his efforts to end apartheid, Mandela endured great suffering on behalf of a noble cause.

This evening we commemorate the feast of the Martyrs of Sudan. As a new saints day in the Episcopal Church, The Martyrs of Sudan is on a trial run in the new "Holy Women, Holy Men" publication that replaces the old "Lesser Feasts and Fasts." I am grateful Trinity Cathedral is honoring this day, lifting up these martyrs in remembrance of their great suffering and sacrifice for the Christian faith.

The witness of the martyrs of Sudan is a powerful one for us both in its magnitude and for just how recent the events that led to its occurring are. Hopefully the lives and sacrifice of these martyrs will shake us out of our own torpor in how we live our own faith lives.

Let me offer a little background on the circumstances that led to the martyrdom of these Christian Sudanese.

The Sudan has been a troubled, war torn nation ever since it gained its independence from the British in 1956. The north of the country is predominantly Muslim and the south is mainly Christian and animist. In the 1980's a coup of the government brought about a northern dominated, Islamic leadership. This new leadership imposed authoritarian control and began instituting a penal code based on Sharia, or Islamic law, on the whole nation.

On May 16, 1983 a small group of Episcopal and Roman Catholic leaders rebelled against this imposition of Sharia and declared they "would not abandon God as they knew him." "Until a peace treaty was signed on January 9, 2005, the Episcopal Church of the Province of the Sudan suffered from persecution and devastation through twenty-two years of civil war. Two and a half million people were killed, half of whom were members of this church. Many clergy and lay leaders were singled out because of their religious leadership in their communities. No buildings, including churches and schools, were left standing in an area the size of Alaska. Four million people were internally displaced, and a more million are scattered around Africa and beyond in the Sudanese Diaspora.

It is specifically these two and a half million people slaughtered during this civil war that we remember today as the Martyrs of Sudan. But the other five million others who have been displaced and undergone great suffering are Christian martyrs in their own right. They have suffered greatly for their beliefs.

Martyrdom is a very alien concept to us. We are at the very least, puzzled by people who care so passionately about their faith that they would suffer and even die for it. In the letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die." Would any of us be willing to die or even dare to die for a good cause based on our principles, our

passionately held beliefs? I doubt it. If professed Christians so easily fall by the wayside from participating in their faith life due to Sunday soccer practice, marathons, football games, the Sunday papers or a few flakes of snow, than sure as I am standing here they are not likely going to profess Christ crucified when armed soldiers are beating down their doors! Paul was prescient; rarely would we be willing to do that for the righteous cause of our beliefs!

Western Christians are wanting of a little sacrifice for their faith or righteous causes.

The Op-Ed page of Sunday's The Plain Dealer had two side-by-side articles that spoke about elements of martyrdom – people suffering for a noble cause - in America. The first article was written by William Chafe, and titled, "Global struggles remind us of our own revolutionary moment." Chafe wrote about the current Arab Spring changing the face of the Middle East, comparing it to the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights movement. The Freedom Riders were Black and White civil rights activists who fifty years ago this month boarded Greyhound and Trailway buses headed for New Orleans to test a Supreme Court ruling ordering the integration of interstate buses that until then had been governed by Jim Crow laws requiring Black passengers to sit at the back of the bus.

Entering Alabama and Mississippi the Freedom riders were meet by members of KKK gangs who beat them with bats, knives and pipes while law enforcement turned a blind eye. Chafe described a group of students from Nashville, who became Freedom Riders, "knowing full well that they might die" yet none-the-less "placed their lives on the line" for this righteous cause. The Freedom Riders were American martyrs who were willing to suffer to the point of death to end racist behavior.

The second op-ed article was written by David Brooks: Titled "The missing fifth of U.S workers," Brooks wrote that America is "becoming less vital and industrious." He bases that opinion on the fact that in 2011 only about 80% of American males between the ages of 25-54 are employed. That number was 96% in 1954. This means that one fifth of all men in their prime working ages are not working. Brooks attributes this to several factors but most importantly to structural changes in the economy and inadequate education. He writes, "the result is this: there are probably more idle men now than at any time since the Great Depression . . . [as a result] these men will pick up habits that have a corrosive cultural influence . . . the country will not benefit from their potential abilities."

One fifth of American men are being left behind, casualties of our changing economy, but also due to callousness toward those who are, as Jesus describes, "the least of these." They are involuntary martyrs to the American ideal of life, liberty and the pursuit of

happiness: things that without a decent education and meaningful employment, they will never achieve.

I am issuing a call to some martyrdom this evening. I am not calling you to be slaughtered or beaten. But I am asking you to endure some suffering in the form of personal discomfort; to make a little sacrifice of time and possibly endure a little ostracizing – or at least odd looks - on behalf of your Christian belief and a very worthy cause.

On Monday, June 6th the Greater Cleveland Congregations will hold a rally to address some of the issues plaguing our society that result in things like one fifth of American males being unemployed and poorly educated. Through this initiative the faith community will address the chronic lack of basic human needs in our city; needs that find their genesis in issues like poverty, persistent racism, hunger, financial insecurity and the lack of access to decent education.

Coming to this rally will require you to martyr yourself to your Monday night off. It will martyr you to having the courage to promote this faith-based initiative to your friends, family, co-workers and neighbors. It will martyr you to some of your free time in the future as the Greater Cleveland Congregations engage significant projects to help make a real difference in the life of the most needy in Cleveland.

Martyring yourself to these things will be nothing like what was endured in Sudan, on the buses to New Orleans or the current suffering of 1/5 of American men. But in so doing it will bring you life as you have never known it before. Ultimately that is what martyrdom is all about.

Amen.