

CHRISTIAN FUNERAL OF LORRAINE KUSKE

Revelation 2:8-11

“Be faithful unto death.”

It's easy to talk about our memories of Lorraine, and there is plenty to remember. She gave a lot to this church and to the Church as a whole. She was a pastor's wife, which meant she bore the crosses her husband bore, often without even knowing the how, when, what, where, and when that caused him such sorrow, joy, anxiety, and frustration intermittently. And she was willing to do that, out of love for her husband, her parishes, the Office of the Holy Ministry, and her Lord. She was like family to many families, an adopted grandmother to many more children than my own. She was sure to make sure the sermon was an appropriate length, and a “Good sermon” after the service meant something, because it always really meant a good Christ-centered “good sermon” had been preached, and wasn't just what you say after the service, which is the way it should be. It's easy to remember Lorraine, because there is much to remember, but I would definitely not get a “good sermon” from her if that was the focus of this sermon. Rather, Lorraine would have us remember what she remembered: her confirmation verse: *“Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”*

Hear the words of the Apostle John from the book of Revelation, chapter two, beginning with verse eight: *“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.”*

The Christians of Smyrna had every reason not to be faithful. Smyrna was a cosmopolitan, sophisticated city of the Roman Empire, respected for its stadium, library, and theater. More than that, however, it was known for its unwavering allegiance to Rome, which was not always common for a city in Asia Minor. So strong was their allegiance to Rome, that they became a center of the new emperor worship advocated by Rome. From the time of Christ's birth to the time of Christ's death, they had already built a temple to the Emperor Tiberius, Livia, and even the Roman senate. Their province was the only one in all of the Empire to have more than one center for emperor worship. They had deified the sinful flesh of the emperors, warts and all, and thus had little use for a faith that would proclaim that the true God had become flesh to redeem what could not save itself.

But that was not the only challenge the people of Smyrna faced. Smyrna also had a large Jewish population that was anything but welcoming to this new teaching of a crucified Jewish King and Messiah. The Jews claimed they were the true heirs of Abraham and Moses, and that the Christians were blasphemous impostors. In so doing, they blasphemed the Christ and actively sought the persecution of the Christian Church. They wanted to win the faithful back to the law, which could bring only despair or self-righteousness, which would exchange the mercy of God for His threats and wrath.

To top it all off, Christ says the people of Smyrna faced poverty. Not only were they persecuted, but they were poor. Talk about kicking a man while he is down.

Jesus is clear about who is behind all this suffering and trial, this testing and tribulation. It is Satan, the Devil. “Satan” means accuser. The word “devil” come from the word for tossing spears or arrows. Both are an apt description of this enemy of the Faith. Satan is the accuser. Through others and even through our own conscience he accuses. Why? Not because he is offended by our sins, but because by throwing them in our face he hopes to blur our view of Christ, so that our Savior becomes instead our cruel judge or a hapless head of the Church. He fires every fiery arrow in his arsenal with the intention of setting our

hearts alight with doubt concerning the will of our God and the wisdom of His rule, with questions about our worthiness to receive Him, although being worthy of grace is oxymoron, and misgivings concerning the strength of our faith. He fires and fires and fires, unrelentingly, wanting each dart to bring us closer to the unquenchable fires of hell, so much so that we can smell the sulfur and feel the hopelessness of his abode. All the while he wants nothing more than to put in our head what he slithered into the minds of our first parents: *“Did God really say? Does God really want what is best for you, or is He holding you back from something better?”*

Yet what does Christ say in the midst of such pain and anguish? *“Be faithful.”* How can He say that? Why doesn't He come down from the blessedness of heaven and walk in our shoes and feel our hurt and wrestle our conscience and take an arrow or two from our fiendish Foe. But that is the point. He has. He was born in a manger—hardly the Hilton. Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, yet He had nowhere to lay His head. He not only wore our dirty sandals, but washed the feet of others who wore them. He battled the Devil in the desert while hungry and alone, with only the Scriptures to swing back as this enemy attacked. He prayed in Gethsemane like few of us have ever prayed, sweating drops like blood. He cried from the cross, our cross, that three-letter word we know so well: *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* No, we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, but One who was tested in every way, yet was without sin. He was our sin that we might become His righteousness.

And that brings us to what *“Be faithful”* means. To *“be faithful”* in this context means to grab on and not let go. Faithfulness is doing what faith does; it is the persistent holding of a beggar to the merciful gift of God that is His Son. This is justification talk, as in Romans 1:17, where St. Paul, quoting Habakkuk, tells us that *“the righteous shall live by faith.”* Faithfulness is the shouting down of the devil with the promises of God and the extinguishing of His arrows with cool baptismal water. Faithfulness cries for more mercy and is content with less of everything else, washing in the font, feasting at the altar, hearkening at the pulpit, clamping its ears on the Absolution God's ambassadors declare, treasuring every bit of it all as the very Treasure of heaven sent down from heaven and into its grasp.

Yes, there is much that would rob us of this treasure. In the case of our text, persecution and suffering, as well as the false teaching. But the Christian has perspective. “Ten days,” He says. And what He means is that, in the eyes of eternity, our trials are but a few ticks of the clock and beats of the anxious heart. Jesus is in control. He has a timetable. He will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear. And He is the *“First and the Last, who was dead and came to life again.”* He will not lead us anywhere He Himself has not gone. He will not let us face one fiery arrow He has not already blunted with His own flesh and blood, given to us in the Sacrament. He is the source, object, and goal of our faith, and faithfulness is nothing more than a confession of that, and a confession that our doubts and the Devil's delusions cannot make untrue what He says is true. So we sing with Lorraine, who sang with Luther, “The Word they still shall let remain nor any thanks have for it; He's by our side upon the plain with His good gifts and Spirit. And take they our life, goods, fame, childe, and wife, let these all be gone, they have nothing won; the Kingdom ours remaineth.”

Lorraine held on to her Savior and His grace. She has gone where He led her. And she would want nothing more than for us to do the same. More importantly, He would want nothing more. He died for Lorraine to live. Lorraine has not died. She has fallen asleep. You cannot kill the dead, and she was already buried with Christ in Baptism. He died for you to live as well. Grab on to that. Never let go, because nothing will ever be as beautiful as what Christ has placed in your hands: Himself, crowned with thorns to make you His crown and to give you the crown of life. Amen.