

Year C, June 2, 2019
7 Easter
Christ Church, Mexia

Today I want to talk about *rigor mentis* (rigid mind) – you’ve heard of *rigor mortis* (rigid body) – let me illustrate: Once upon a time there was a man who thought he was dead. His concerned wife and friends sent him to the friendly neighborhood psychiatrist. The psychiatrist determined to cure him by convincing him of one fact that contradicted his belief that he was dead. The psychiatrist decided to use the simple truth that dead men do not bleed. He put his patient to work reading medical texts, observing autopsies, etc. After weeks of effort, the patient finally said, “All right, all right! You’ve convinced me. Dead men do not bleed.” Whereupon the psychiatrist stuck him in the arm with a needle, and the blood flowed. The man looked down with a contorted, ashen face and cried: Good Lord! Dead men bleed after all!” That’s rigid mind.

Rigor mentis is a word from one of John Cleese’s business training films where he illustrates that we sometimes tend to hold on to old beliefs, despite any revelation of new knowledge. I don’t think you’ll find it in many dictionaries, but I believe it is a valid concept. When I was growing up in Virginia during the 1940s and 50s, for example, we were convinced that the South would rise again - that our defeat in the Civil War was only a temporary setback that would be rectified shortly. Our version of what happened at Appomattox was that Gen. Grant came to surrender to Gen. Lee – and the lesson to be learned from that situation was NOT to drink with the enemy, especially if he was known to be a lush!

Now I don’t think very many people truly believed that, especially the last part, but the south rising again was discussed a lot – too much, in fact, to be healthy almost 100 years after the war had ended. Something that we did believe, that was justified by the Bible (at least as adults taught it to me), was that Blacks were inferior people, incapable of doing many things for themselves. It was in the Bible – they were the cursed bunch, cursed by God. And as silly, hopefully, as that sounds today, some people sadly still believe this.

The Bible, so I was taught, prohibited marriage between races (black and white primarily), and Virginia law rigidly enforced this concept as well. The Bible also was used as the authority to disallow women having any positions of leadership in our church. And if you were male

and had been divorced, you need not apply either, because although we talked about forgiveness, A LOT, we didn't practice it much.

We didn't use the word, gay, then either. We called them queers, and we called them that with great derision because they were sinners of the worst kind! The Bible told us so. We were told we had to do certain things and to avoid certain things in order to get into heaven, because you had to earn the privilege, brothers and sisters – you had to earn it! Grace was a word that we used only to describe prayer before a meal. Such was the understanding of theology in those days, at least in the church I attended – and many people hold on to a good deal of that theology today. *Rigor mentis*. The message was mostly about guilt, and very little about love. It was about self-righteousness rather than compassion. And I could never understand how, if Christ died for all our sins, I could be going to hell for mine. But if you still believe the "ol' time religion," there are sadly plenty of places to go and find it.

In our reading from John today, Jesus was praying for the disciples, and his prayer was not only on behalf of them, but also for all of us who would come to believe. And his prayer was that we would all become one – just as Jesus and God are one. And to me, this is the bedrock message of the New Testament! But God reveals things to us at different times, when culture and education level and other things, such as our level of spiritual growth, allow us to understand God's Word in different ways. This is the only way the Bible can have relevance for us today, because it was written in or before the 1st century CE – a very different time and culture. So, the Holy Spirit has to help us discern what it means for us. Charles Swindoll pictures it this way: "God's Word is like a log sitting on top of the ice on a frozen lake. When the ice thaws and melts, the log penetrates into the water and becomes a part of the lake. The trials that come along in life are like that thawing process. They melt the heart and allow God's Word to penetrate and become part of us." - if we don't have *rigor mentis*.

But for the grace of God, I could still be like I was, was taught to be, in my childhood in Virginia, and despite all I have seen and learned over the years, I could still hold on to the beliefs that I was taught – despite all of the evidence to the contrary. I could still believe that I am "dead" – to place it into the context of the opening story.

I am so thankful that I found the Episcopal Church, because it is not afraid to embrace new concepts, information and understanding. It's not perfect, it's made up of people after all; it didn't speak out against

slavery in the early days of this country, but many of its clergy were in the forefront of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Chris Yaw, an Episcopal Priest, writes of his first visit to St. John the Divine in NYC, the cathedral of the Episcopal Diocese of New York and the largest Gothic building in the US: "I had this overpowering sense of acceptance – that God's arms were wide open. It was most apparent in the stories told in stained glass. Hundreds of windows represent an amazing variety of people, places, and things. There are hallowed standbys like St. Peter, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. But you also find Martin Luther King, Jr., Albert Einstein, and Gandhi." ...Some chapels are dedicated to things like sports, poetry and AIDS. ..."On the altar you won't *just* find a cross - you might also find a menorah or a Shinto vase. A Jewish visitor once said, "All religions reject, reject, reject, exclude, exclude, exclude, but I come to your Cathedral and what do I find? In statuary and in glass I find labor and management side by side. I find athletics and psychiatry side by side." ... "And God is right in the middle of it all." May it always be so.

Jesus did not reject/exclude – he accepted/included. "Religious people" of his day made fun of him for eating with tax collectors, prostitutes and the like. And when he healed on the Sabbath, they persecuted him. But think about it - is it more important to obey the law of not working on the Sabbath or to heal the suffering? These are the choices, the decision-making process, Jesus modeled for us: Jesus expects us to use our God-given brain to question and oppose those who model and promote hatred or bigotry, exclusion or rejection, or closed-mindedness, or blind obedience to dogma, or retention of social stereotypes, especially those that are prejudicial – or those who exhibit *rigor mentis* - because they invoke hatred, not love, and promote divisiveness, not unity. The Bible, the Word of God, and especially the Word Incarnate, Jesus, were given to us to change our understanding and our lives – to transform us – not just once, but over and over again. In closing let me leave you with a thought from Leighton Ford: "God loves us the way we are, but (God) loves us too much to leave us that way."

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.
Amen.