

Here we are today at the beginning of a new semester, hovering on the cusp of another Lenten journey, and the church bids us remember the Martyrs of Japan, the six Franciscan friars and the twenty Japanese converts who were crucified in Nagasaki over four hundred years ago.

As always seems to be the case with saints and holy ones, the church bids us remember them for their heroism, for the way they fearlessly faced down death, and today is no exception. Today's collect says it clearly, "Grant that we, being encouraged by their example, may hold fast the faith that we profess, even to death itself." I don't know about you, but that message doesn't hit too close to home for me.

Don't get me wrong, I am always amazed by the witness of martyrs like the ones we remember today, but my day-to-day life remains untouched by the threat of persecution and death. My first reaction to another group of martyrs is a sense of weariness. I brace myself to hear again about people from far off times and places who were so much better at being Christian than I am that they got killed for it. I find that the martyr's death which we emphasize so frequently tells me very little about how I should live as a disciple of Jesus or even what it might mean to "hold fast the faith" in my daily life.

Strange then, that today's Gospel has Jesus telling us to start in a very different place. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me..." Jesus begins the call to discipleship, not from a position of hanging on at all costs, but from a position of letting go.

Some folks have suggested that this letting go, this self-denial, is about being humble, about erasing our ego, avoiding arrogance and pride, about making oneself low and submissive...but I don't think that understanding of humility is adequate to what the Gospel today is talking about.

In fact, I think this understanding can be downright dangerous, especially when used to encourage acceptance of victimization and injustice as it has been for women, minorities, and victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

And where does this leave those who have so denied themselves or been so beaten down by others, that there remains no self for them to deny? How do they then deny self and humble themselves?

I propose we look at humility and self-denial in another way, not as attempts to make ourselves low, but as an honest self-assessment, an honest acknowledgment of our own gifts and limitations, one that ends in seeing the other as gift rather than threat or competition.

In this, I think we get closer to the Latin root for humility which means earth or ground. This root reminds us of the words we hear each Ash Wednesday, the words we will hear tomorrow, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It functions as a stark reminder of our own mortality, of our ultimate limitedness.

But it is not only a reminder of our limitedness, it is also suggestive of rich earth, of humus soil, the dark, decaying organic matter which gives the earth its fertility, making it abundant.

In this sense it reminds us not only of our own limitations, but of our remarkable potential for growth, our amazing ability to participate in the healing of the world, for we are the very good soil, the decaying organic matter in which God has planted God's very self and in which God continues to plant God's Spirit.

In this humility that sees both limitations and promise, denying self becomes something other than avoiding arrogance or seeking to be submissive. Rather, it is like tilling the soil, breaking open the hard-packed earth so that there is room for the seed, so that there are cracks and fissures, places where water and air can seep in to nourish growth.

The Martyrs of Japan bear witness to our need to till the soil of ourselves, to cultivate an openness to the other. These martyrs died because two powerful groups refused to break open the soil of their identities in order to allow space for the other. The Christian missionaries came with their European identity and their Christian faith so closely connected that they could not tell them apart. The Japanese rulers feared that they would be the next in a string of peoples that were Christianized and then colonized. They were afraid to lose their Japanese identity and saw becoming Christian as the end of being Japanese. Between them, there was no room for the other. The Europeans had no room in their Christianity for being Japanese and the Japanese had no room in their identity for being Christian.

Perhaps, then, we should honor the Martyrs of Japan not just for the fact that they were martyred but for their courage in breaking open new spaces, new space in their Japanese identity for being Christian, and new spaces in Eurocentric Christianity for other ways of being Christian.

Our daily struggles to till the soil of ourselves and create spaces for new growth are unlikely to be as dramatic as the Martyrs of Japan. Nevertheless, we can engage this work in our ordinary lives. For some it may involve listening in the classroom, in a meeting, or in a friendly conversation when one's normal response would have been to speak. For others, it might mean recognizing that their limitations are self-imposed, that they can in fact minister to the suffering without fear of making things worse. In this community, it could mean opening ourselves up to the new students who have joined us this semester, learning about them and their gifts so that we may all share in the fullness of their presence. For all of us, it will mean prayer. Prayer that raises up the other, especially those we don't like or find difficult. By lifting up those we don't like in prayer, we create a space in ourselves where we can experience their gifts and see the good earth God has made in them.

This Lent, let us see ourselves as we truly are, limited and broken to be sure, but good earth as well, good earth in which God has planted God's self in Jesus Christ. Though this work is not easy, we can be confident because Jesus has walked this road ahead of us and walks the road with us and within us, promising courage and strength for the journey, always bidding us to follow on.