Solemn Reflections **<u>2nd Sunday in Lent –YEAR B</u>** **Mark 8: 31-38**
St. Brendan, Deer Isle ME, first version in commemorating the death of
Dr William Jenkins, St Andrews Millinocket (Feb 27, 2015)

It is great to be back with you at St Brendan's, in this season of Lent. I have often thought of this period as a dull and dreary time, for who wants to look so deeply at our mortality? But if we hear and absorb the words of our Psalm for this morning, we may get some sense of why we should do it seriously: "**Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false … They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation.** (PSALM 24" It is a serious task, not for our well-being alone, but for future-generations as well.

The word which is often used in connection with this type of reflection is **SOLEMN**. One meaning of this word is "stately or formal." A fellow priest says: "We have these moments in worship," she says, "but Lent is not a stately, formal time. The word solemn also means 'deeply earnest, serious, and sober.' **<u>Here</u>** is Lent's solemnity. We take seriously the destructive consequences of our lives **<u>apart from God's grace</u>."** It is we who have become alien, not the God who cares for us. And so, "we take a self-inventory and sober up to acknowledge our sense of distance from God, between others, and even distance from our own true self - a distance that comes from our own choices. Like the story of the prodigal-son and his father, Lent is the time to come to our right mind and return to the embrace of a loving Father.

It is interesting that **the root of the word solemn** comes from the Latin word for **'WHOLE.'** Our solemn work in Lent is to devote time for our wholeness, which can only be complete when we are at one with God and with others in the power of God's transforming love. This does not mean forty days of gloom, but forty days for us to contemplate and act in ways that bring us alive[1]" to God and our fellow believers.

II> One way I have experienced a greater sense of wholeness and transformation this month has been with my experiences in exploring the resources of Black History month (or for me, I would more exactly call the experience <u>Racial Awareness</u> month, since my exposure to a number of issues among our American Indian neighbors has overlapped with with those of other Americans of color). But the single event of great power which I want to share with you this morning comes from a Public

Broadcasting program in conjunction with Black History month, entitled *The Black Church* (Feb 2021, McGee Media and WETA). They tell the story of the emergence of the Rev Jeremiah Wright in the Southside of Chicago in the 1970's. Rev Wright attended seminary at same time as me, and was sent to Trinity Unitarian Church. D The congregation was down from a much larger one to about 80 members. When asked about this, Rev Wright says: "Oh yeh, they said we'll get some fool to come and do a funeral for them." Interviewer… and here you are. "Here I am, all these years later. I told them then: **Christ never did no funerals**. He did Resurrections." Within a few years of his arrival, Trinity had grown from those 80 members to over 8000. In the kind of inspiration Rev. Wright brought to Chicago, the words of one of his early sermons sums up his approach to redemption and truth. " The **CULTURE says**, you the wrong race. **The CHRIST says**, I CREATED race, and I ain't made no mistakes! **The CULTURE says** … Yo' skin is BLACK. **The CHRIST** says: and **so is mine**."

The stories of the history of black Americans make up a constant account of suffering, injustice, and frustration. Yet no group exhibits a greater expression of dignity, hope and empowerment. With all the loss and grief we have recently experienced in our world during the past year, there is no better time to explore the solemn choices which lie ahead. It is not easy to focus on improving our spiritual awareness and growth in such times: in fact, sometimes it seems downright impossible. So I want to share another very special story with you this morning; one which I think puts perspective on our loss and reactions to it.

III > **Dr. Rachel Remen** is clinical professor of Family and Community Medicine at the Univ of California - San Francisco School of Medicine. Dr Remen has trained thousands of physicians to practice medicine from the heart. She also has had **Crohn's disease since the age of 15**. Crohn's disease is a chronic inflammatory disorder, in which the body's immune system attacks the gastrointestinal tract. The disease is very painful and debilitating; there are no medications or surgical procedures that can cure Crohn's disease, but surgery is often necessary to remove abscesses, obstructions, and cancers. The following is a remarkable reflection on Dr. Remen's response to this difficult disease.[2.]

"AT THE BEGINNING, I reacted to suffering and limitation **with rage**. At fifteen, when I had become very ill, I **needed to consult my disease**

on the simplest matters. Would it allow me to eat a piece of cheese? Did I have the strength to walk up this flight of stairs? Would it be possible to sit through the movies without needing to leave because of agonizing stomach pains? The authority of this disease would stand no argument from me. It still shapes my life, but with a far lighter hand.

Perhaps only an adolescent can feel the sort of rage I felt then. **I hated all the well people**, hated the side of my family that had passed me these genes. I hated my body. **I was in this state of rage for almost ten years**.

Shortly before my final year of medical training, things changed. I had been offered the opportunity to be senior resident at a fine training hospital. Yet I barely had enough strength to do the work I was presently doing. **Here was one more dream stolen**. That afternoon I drove to the old beach house that had been given to our hospital for the use of the faculty and staff. In turmoil, I walked wearily along the water's edge, comparing myself to others my own age, people of seemingly boundless vitality. I came up wanting. I remember thinking that this disease had robbed me of my youth. **I did not yet know what it had given me in exchange**. In response to these painful thoughts, came a wave of anger so intense it gives full meaning to the word rage. It flooded me, the sort of feeling I had experienced many times before. But for some reason, this time I did not drown in it. Instead**, I sort of noticed it go by and something inside me said**, "You have no vitality? Here's your vitality."

Shocked, I recognized the **connection between my anger and my will to live**. My anger was my will to live turned inside out. My life force was just as intense, just as powerful as my anger, but for the first time I could experience it as different and feel it directly. In that first moment of surprise, I had a glimpse of something fundamental about who I am. That at the core of things I have an intense love of life, a wish to participate fully in life and to help others to do the same. Somehow this had grown large in me **as a result of the very limitations that I had thought were thwarting it**. Like the power of a dammed-up river.

I had not known this before. I also knew that in its present form, **as rage**, this power was trapped. My anger had helped me to survive, to resist my disease, even to fight on, but in the SHAPE of anger I could not use my strength to build the kind of life I longed to live. And t**hen I knew that I no longer needed to do it this way.**

I knew with absolute certainty that my pain was nobody's fault; that the world was not to blame for it. It was a moment of real freedom. I took that job. When things got rough, I asked others for their help. I had been too angry and bitter to do that before. It was a very important year.

I still get angry sometimes, but in ordinary ways. My anger does not begin to compare to the rage that was my life companion for all those years. That rage served me well. It defended my integrity and grew my vitality. It said no to the limitations of my disease. But something else would be required to say yes to my life."

Dr. Remen has given us a "serious and earnest" look at how to deal with the effects of pain and loss. And this is exactly what Jesus meant, I believe, when he told his followers "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." THIS is our cross: to face and pass through our times of pain, and to abide in God's grace not **in spite of pain**, but BECAUSE of it. To contemplate and act in ways that bring us alive to God so that all the fruit of the Spirit is carried out in our lives. A Spirit which is defined **exactly** in the Epistle to the Galatians (5:22): "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Those who stand for us as inspiration in such "aliveness," in such great spirit, are indeed our saints. Let us hold onto that knowledge, and their truth in the days to come. It is a great example to follow, and it IS solemn work.

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1. Ruth Lawson Kirk, "*Walking Day By Day*," page 58 (Forward Movement Publications 2015)

2. *DAMMING THE RIVER,* from **Kitchen Table Wisdom**, page 39; RIVERHEAD BOOKS/ PENGUIN PUTNAM (January 1, 2013)