

25 Sunday B

September 19, 2021

St. Patrick's

The apostles were arguing with one another.

We heard that in today's Gospel. St. Patrick's, we're in the middle three chapters of St. Mark's Gospel, the first of the four Gospels written. These three chapters were the first catechism of the early church. In this main section of St. Mark's Gospel, for the first time Jesus teaches his disciples that he would be tortured and killed and, then, "**will rise again.**" In fact, he taught them this *three times*.

This Sunday we hear Jesus teaching the apostles the second time, that he would suffer terribly and be killed.

Right after that, the apostles were arguing with one another...about which one of them was the most important, #1.

The apostles didn't really hear. They couldn't see.

Sister Thea Bowman is buried two miles from here in Elmwood Cemetery. She was born in Canton, Mississippi, a deep pocket of racism and discrimination. She was the only child of the only Black physician in the town, and her mother was an educator. Sister Thea's parents were appalled at the public education their daughter was getting in this hotbed of segregation. When she was nine years old, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration came from Wisconsin and opened a school in Canton.

That changed Sister Thea's life. Her keen intellect was challenged. She soon became a Catholic. And, at the age of 15, she told her parents she wanted to go to Wisconsin to become a Franciscan nun.

She became the only woman of color in the midst of 300 other Franciscan sisters. She knew deeply this was *her* calling, *her* vocation. Sister Thea taught in both Wisconsin and, for eight years, in her hometown of Canton. She got her doctorate in English literature in Washington, D.C., and became a college professor.

Then, with her parents' health failing, Sister Thea returned to Mississippi. The Bishop there asked her to develop Black ministry and liturgy in Mississippi. Sister Thea never covered up her blackness. She weaved into her preaching and witness

Black songs, dance, literature...and hope. Sister Thea gave a revival here at St. Patrick's. In fact, she became world famous, a faith celebrity within our nation.

Sister Thea died in 1990 at the age of 52. The last six years of her life she struggled with cancer. It kept invading her body, and she suffered terribly. But it didn't hold her back from her calling—as a sister, a preacher, and a Black leader who demanded justice.

Ah, yes, those first apostles argued with one another, just as Jesus was trying to teach them about *his* suffering and cross. They argued about who stood out among them. Against the shadow of the cross, Jesus teaches them—and us—**“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”**

A year before her death, two anonymous donors arranged for the renowned portrait painter, Marshall Bouldin, to paint Sister Thea's portrait.

It's a powerful portrait, with Sister Thea sitting in a chair, with only the bronze corpus of the crucified Jesus hanging on the wall behind her. What stands out is that Sister Thea is much thinner due to the cancer's spread; and, she is bald. Later, the artist revealed that it was Sister Thea who persuaded him to paint her image without hair (1). She could no longer dance, but she wanted to teach by her bald head, a badge of suffering. As she once put it, “When I'm tired, weak and in pain...I like to sing some of the old songs: **“Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand. I'm tired, I'm weak, and I'm worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me on”**” (2).

In the Gospel Jesus keeps hammering away at the blind apostles about his suffering, his cross...and that they would need to **“take up his cross and follow me”** (Mark 8:34).

Sister Thea didn't hide her suffering. It was part of her preaching, her message. It was one unique way that Jesus called her to **“take up the cross and follow”** him. She didn't want to hide it.

Friends: Jesus keeps hammering away at us about his cross. We can't hide how he wants each of us to follow after him. Instead, we make it part of *our* story, giving witness to *his* suffering...and new life.

- (1) See Charlene Smith and John Feister, *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), pg. 229.
- (2) *Ibid.*, quoting Sister Thea, pg. 264.

General Intercessions

September 19, 2021

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Kindle your Holy Spirit within us, your Church, that we might follow Jesus more closely in his journey to the cross; we pray to you, O Lord—

Give healing and hope within our Church universal, and within our own Diocese of Memphis; we pray to you, O Lord—

Bring comfort and relief to all victims of hurricanes, flooding, fires; and the coronavirus waging in our midst; we pray to you, O Lord—

Protect the unborn, the unwanted, and immigrants and refugees seeking a new home; we pray to you, O Lord—

Welcome all who have died into your loving embrace, especially Barbara Weddle, Gary Harder, and all who have died from COVID-19; we pray to you, O Lord—