

4 Sunday A

January 29, 2023

St. Patrick

Listen to this provocative Word of God, penned by the Apostle Paul: **“God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...”**

The renowned Black American theologian, Howard Thurman, almost 75 years ago wrote in a classic book entitled Jesus and the Disinherited: **“I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the person who stands with his back against the wall”** (1). Our Christian religion—Thurman observes—is most often made up of those who *help* the folks with their back against the wall.

Every Good Friday, we at St. Patrick’s walk through our neighborhood, praying the Stations of the Cross. We link Jesus’ suffering and death with that of many in our neighborhood. Our 7th Station is at the corner of 2nd Street and G.E. Patterson. It remembers the 1866 Memphis Massacre. Strangely, 1866 is the *very same year* this parish was founded. In that same year, during the first three days of May, there was what the local news called the “Negro Riot.” As our 7th Station puts it, “In truth, it was a massacre by white people angry and afraid of economic decline from the loss of slave labor.” The white mob killed an estimated 46 Black people and raped several Black women. “Four churches, twelve schools and 91 other dwellings were burned” (from the marker at the site).

In the aftermath of the Civil War, in reality the Black community here in Memphis stood with their backs against the wall. In the decades which followed until now, systemic racism has kept economic security from large swathes of the Black community. Black people have been made to stand with their backs against the wall. They have been made to endure unjust educational opportunities, made to live in pockets of abject poverty; and they have too often felt the brunt of police brutality and threats, as happened with the police in the 1866 Memphis Massacre. Let’s be candid: What happened to Tyre Nichols wouldn’t have happened had he been white. Black people have been forced to live in the lowest caste, and treated accordingly. They stand with their backs against the wall.

St. Patrick’s: With the horrific killing of Tyre Nichols by five Black police officers, we have to face that *all of us in this city* now stand with our backs against

the wall. The gulf, the chasm, between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is far too wide, and it’s based primarily around race. We need each other, or our city will become “*The Memphis Massacre.*” Yes, all of us in the City of Memphis now stand with our backs against the wall, and the wall may well give way and crush us all.

Oh, Friends, what a blessing that once again these four Sundays we’re formed by Jesus’ most famous sermon, his Sermon on the Mount! I need to hear Jesus’ words this Sunday and the following three Sundays as if I have never heard them before: **“Blessed are the peacemakers”; “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice”; “Love your enemies”; “Do not resist the evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. You cannot serve God and wealth.”**

Whether we accept it or not, St. Patrick’s: Now, here in Memphis, we *all* stand with our backs against the wall as Jesus again preaches to us *his* Sermon on the Mount! May Jesus look at us and, as he did again and again in the Beatitudes, call us **“blessed!”**

(1) Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pg. 3.

General Intercessions

January 29, 2023

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Grace us to live as a people of the Beatitudes,
humbly relying on the power of Christ's grace in our lives;
We pray to you, O Lord:**

**Take away the evil of violence and systemic racism in our city and
world; that we may live truly as peacemakers;
We pray to you, O Lord:**

**Give safety and strength to Pope Francis as he makes this week his
pilgrimage to the impoverished and hungry people of South Sudan
and the Congo; We pray to you, O Lord:**

**Bless the sick, especially those who will celebrate the Sacrament of
the Anointing of the Sick during our Masses next weekend: that
they may experience the healing they most need from Jesus' loving
touch; We pray to you, O Lord:**

**Embrace with your eternal love all who have died, especially *Ty-re
Nichols, Paulist Father Charlie Martin*; and all who have perished
in the Ukraine war; We pray to you, O Lord:**

