

**Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer**

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**“Life Within Life”**

**Matthew 26: 59-64; Matthew 27: 45-54**

Porter Halyburton was a prisoner of war for seven long years.

Besides the torture, the starvation, the homesickness, the sadness at being incarcerated, and the ceaseless insecurity of vulnerability to sadistic guards,

Halyburton and his fellow prisoners faced another enemy – sheer boredom.

Initially, Halyburton coped with his many idle hours in the present by living in the past.

He tried to recall every memory that he could summon, cherish every past achievement, confront every mistake, glean through introspection ways to learn from all experiences, good and bad.

He started creating a wish list of things that he wanted to do when he gained his freedom so that not a moment would be wasted.

He even created seventy-seven folders in his mind that catalogued all of his interests, filing information in each folder for that day when he was released.

There was just one problem: when he emerged from these mental exercises, he still found himself in prison.

His captors kept telling him they would keep him another ten or twenty years.

But as the number of American prisoners increased, more of them were placed together, providing opportunity for the formation of meaningful community.

They did calisthenics together, improvised competitions in pushups, leg bends and the like.

They began to pool their knowledge, each prisoner serving as teacher and student, holding courses in history, literature, music theory, math and foreign languages.

They even made a slide rule out of a stick of bamboo.

They prepared imaginary meals, describing the ingredients, preparation, presentation and taste of each item.

They taught each other songs, and Porter created a mental jukebox, with each song corresponding to a particular letter and number.

Porter was the most creative prisoner in the group. He even created a chessboard and a deck of cards out of bits of toilet paper and cigarette ash. He even taught his fellow prisoners to play bridge.

When the guards found his “cards” and confiscated them, he devised a way to play “mental bridge,” each player holding an imaginary deck in his head.

Alas, that exercise created so many disputes among them that they had to stop it.

But over the next several years, as Halyburton lived with eight or nine prisoners at a time, he made an astounding discovery. He no longer needed freedom to live a significant life.

In the midst of this community of prisoners that supported him intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, he discovered that his life no longer depended on being free from prison in order to be meaningful.

None of the conventional standards of success applied to his life: he had no money, academic degrees, career achievements, or material possessions .

Yet within conditions of horrible captivity,

he found the spiritual wherewithal to create “a life within life” that mattered.

If his captors kept him another ten, or even twenty years, he realized his life would not be wasted.

He had discovered the power of his mind, the creativity of his imagination, and the spiritual prowess to grow in soul.

These discoveries gave him a freedom and a purpose that no prison guard could take away.

Within horrible conditions, Porter Halyburton found the power to discern and create “life within life,” even when his captors wreaked all kinds of evil upon him.

Jesus’ captors wreaked all kinds of evil upon him, too.

He heard people articulate fabricated charges against him:

“He said he would destroy the Temple and build it again in three days.”

He did not answer these accusations, knowing that any protest would be fruitless.

He heard public opinion cry to spare the robber Barabbas’ life over his own.

He heard crowds that once heard him preach now scream, “Let him be crucified!”

Yet, within all of those horrible conditions of life, our Lord found the power to carry on a life within his life.

He found the spiritual wherewithal to see his life as service unto God.

He found the spiritual strength even amidst his arrest, torture, condemnation and crucifixion to maintain a conversation with God.

Think of Jesus standing before the high priest, who serves as his interrogator.

He heard false charges leveled against him, charges that would result in his death, yet he said nothing.

“Have you no answer to make against these charges?” the high priest asked.

But Jesus refused to acknowledge the right of his interrogator to ask the question.

The high priest pressed him, “I adjure you, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”

In truth, earlier, when Peter has offered this very description of Jesus, he had affirmed it as God’s revelation, but now he kept his silence before these people who falsely deemed themselves his justified judges.

He said only, “You have said so.”

Amidst this interrogation, our Lord looked beyond his present circumstances to a time that no one else could see. He saw in his humiliation an expression of the divine will that none of them could detect.

He heard a conversation with his Father that none of them could hear, and so he said,

“Hereafter, you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Naturally, his tormenters could not look beyond the immediacy of the moment.

They scourged him with whips, crowned him with thorns, beat him, covered him in spittle, mocked him, and ultimately nailed him to a cross where he hung naked, subject to public ridicule.

When God’s delivering angels did not come in droves to release him from his lethal torture, they mocked Jesus as a liar.

They offered him their own tests of faith: “If you’ll come down from the cross, then we’ll believe.”

But Jesus continued to see even his death as part of his ongoing conversation with God.

He maintained the ability to see “life within life,” even amidst his death.

His final cogent words, as recorded in Matthew, while they seem to be words of abandonment and despair, were nevertheless words of dialogue with the heavenly Father whom he had pledged to serve to the end:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

According to the Scriptures, even that last statement was misunderstood by his hearers.

And so, with a final shriek, our Lord gave up his life. He died.

As Porter Halyburton learned the hard way, and as the story of Jesus amply demonstrates, we are not always allowed control over the external circumstances of our lives.

People can impose upon us all manner of restrictive prisons, can hold us in the thrall of their condemnation, can attempt to impose upon us the template of their values.

Porter Halyburton’s captors tried brainwashing him everyday with the message that he was evil and he was forgotten.

In response, Porter hung to the comfort of Christ that he was loved by God and nothing could separate him from God's love.

Likewise, irony of ironies, the man who revealed the very nature of the God of the universe was condemned to death by his own religious authorities under the charge of blasphemer.

He was criticized for lying about the nature of God!

Christ's captors tried to tell him that not only was he wrong about God's intent for him, he was wrong about the entire nature and purpose of God, that his life posed an insult to and parody of God. But even on the cross Christ kept touch with the power of life within life.

Our Lord calls us to act in a similar fashion.

There are people among us who do not find themselves in the job they want, people here who are wishing and praying that their economic circumstances improve soon.

There are people here today looking for Mr. or Mrs. Right, wishing and praying that the right person enter their lives.

There are people among us thinking that their lives are really a prison, and they are hoping and praying for a change of circumstances.

There may be people among us who are dealing with some medical malady that shackles them, and they are hoping and praying for circumstances of healing.

There may be people among us thinking that life really has crucified them.

But there is also the Christ on the cross who hangs before us and with us in whatever difficulty we find ourselves in and says,

'I can give you the power to find life within life.

Regardless of your job, your finances, your relationships, your health or your situation,

I can give you the power to create a meaningful and purposeful life, even if your circumstances do not change in the way you want.'

Ultimately, the integrity of our faith hinges on our belief that God is as good as His Word.

We bet our life on God's faithfulness.

The external circumstances surrounding our life will always be outside our control to some degree.

We may often feel as if we hang on a cross. But our Christ hangs with us.

Our Christ gives us the power to find and maintain life within life.

That is why we cannot live as those who have no hope.

That is why we can hold to the promise of God amidst any darkness in our lives.

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Good Friday Tenebrae Homily