

To put today's gospel into context, we should understand that Jesus and his disciples were walking toward Jerusalem. He knew that suffering and death awaited him there. Along the way, he pulled his twelve disciples aside and told them for the third time (!) what was going to happen to him: "*Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death, but after three days he will rise.*" (Mk 10:33-34).

It would seem that the two brothers, James and John, were simply not good listeners. They were two of his earliest and closest disciples, yet it's as though they didn't even hear what he had said. Their minds were not on Jesus, but instead on themselves: "*Thank you, Jesus, that's very interesting. Actually, we've got a question though...it's something we want you to do for us*". And we learn that it was a request to be given positions marked by power and prestige.

I can imagine in that moment, that Jesus had to stop, close his eyes for a moment and take a deep breath or two before answering, to resist the impulse to shout. He must have thought, "*Have they not heard anything I've said thus far? Have they not seen my example of how to live?*" At last, he explained it to them...again! "*The life I'm calling you to is not about seeking worldly power. Instead, your power will be demonstrated in laying down your life.*"

Indeed, it is in laying down our lives for the good of others that we find meaning and purpose. One example of what Jesus is calling us to come to mind for me this week. His name was Stanley Rother. He was born in central Oklahoma in the year 1935, into a family of farmers. As a young man, he felt the call to become a priest and entered seminary. He struggled academically, and after six years, was advised to withdraw. Undoubtedly, disheartened, he remained determined, and eventually his bishop helped him to continue seminary studies. He was ordained a priest in 1963 and began his priesthood serving in parishes.

Roughly five years later, he volunteered to serve a mission in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala. It was an eye-opening experience, and he quickly fell in love with the place and its people. He and the other eleven people who made up the Oklahoma mission team, established the first farmers' co-op, a school, built the first hospital clinic and the first Catholic radio station, which was used for catechesis.¹

There had not been a resident priest for more than a century at the oldest parish in the diocese. The people were as malnourished spiritually as they were physically, and it required him to learn, not only Spanish, but also the pre-Hispanic indigenous language, Tz'utujil.²

It did not take long for Father Rother to become introduced to the violent and deadly conflict within Guatemala. He did his best to keep his head down, to remain courageous, as he served the people God had entrusted to him. Yet, in early 1981, after more than a decade of trying to navigate the sociological unrest and having received personal death threats from anti-religious powers, he returned to Oklahoma.

But he worried for the people whom he had come to love, and soon determined to be among them to celebrate Easter, saying: "*The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger. Pray for us that we may be a sign of the love of Christ for our people, that our presence among them will fortify them to endure these sufferings in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom.*"³

Just after midnight on July 28, 1981, gunmen broke into his rectory. Fr. Rother was shot twice in the head. Although his body was soon returned to Oklahoma for burial, at the request of his former Tz'utujil parishioners, his heart was given to them and buried beneath the altar of the church in Santiago Atitlán.

Indeed, it is in laying down our lives that we find meaning and purpose. Many heroic figures like Fr. Stanley Rother show us what it looks like. But also our parents do it for us. Our moms put themselves at risk to carry us for nine months in their bodies.

¹ <https://archokc.org/news/bl-stanley-francis-rother-americas-first-martyr-after-40-years>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Thinking about James and John, it seems they were driven by ambition. So much of what we celebrate in pop culture and in sports is self-promotion. To be sure, Jesus had ambition too: to raise up the lowly, to point hearts and minds toward the Father. Jesus isn't anti-ambition, but he is opposed to worldly ambition.

What are your ambitions (or goals), whether those for the upcoming week, the year or for further on in life? Do they involve laying down your life for the good of others? Are they for God's glory and moving others toward it, or do they merely have to do with your glory and things of this world?