

## **Homily – A Ministry of Presence**

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Part of my process in preparing a sermon is to read through the scripture passages of the week to see what they might be saying to me. I find that saying the words out loud while I pace through my house to be an effective way of soaking in the words. I try to see if there is a theme that jumps out at me – a theme that is relevant to the lived lives of the people who will be hearing the sermon.

Often the theme that I find is based on other things that have been happening during the week. This week there were three things that helped me arrive at the theme of today's sermon.

First, I read a short book called "From Brokenness to Community". This book is about two lectures that Jean Vanier gave at Harvard Divinity School. In these lectures Vanier speaks of "the lessons he has learned from the disabled adults he serves at his community in France and at other houses. He speaks of his own healing and his own need for people. He speaks of the power of belonging and how it satisfies the deepest needs in people." One particular observation that I read in the lectures was about how many disabled adults feel marginalized by others. There is a sense of shame that develops when one is dismissed as having little value. Providing loving community was an effective way to help disabled adults feel valued again. This was the first thing that helped inform my mediations on this week's sermon theme.

The second was a meeting I had with three of you. In the meeting we were trying to figure out how to best help another parishioner who has both physical and cognitive challenges. A sense of isolation has developed in the parishioner and this had resulted in depression. In our meeting, we kept coming back to visits as one of the most effective things that we could do for this challenged parishioner.

The third thing that helped shape this sermon theme was the widening demonization of our Islamic brothers and sisters. I think we are all aware of the acts of terror by a few radicalized Muslims. Unfortunately, some are using the acts of a few to justify and spread some pretty nasty and inaccurate stereotypes. I was heartened to read in the newspaper that the San Luis Obispo Ministerial Association, this is an interfaith clergy group, that they had held a rally at the mosque in SLO to show support for our Muslim brothers and sisters. While some are building up walls to isolate Muslims, others are actively working to break down those walls and build new relationships.

So, as I kept re-reading today's Scripture readings my weekly experiences helped me to narrow in on part of our passage from the prophet Zephaniah.

*"I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."*

The Book of Zephaniah is a short book of only three chapters. It was written six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and like other prophetic books it contains words that condemn bad behavior and concludes with the words of hope that we heard today.

Again, *"I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."*

Now, unfortunately, we do many things in life that get in the way of our relationship with God, our relationships with others and our relationship with ourselves. We also do many things to hamper the relationships of others. Our actions or inactions make it difficult for others to be in healthy relationship with God, others and self.

However, when we become mindful, and self aware, then we can resolve to change that. We can be mindful of the way that disabled adults often live in isolation. We can be mindful of the shame of others – shame, by the way, that is caused when we seem to have no use or need for another. We can be mindful of how others are being demonized by false stereotypes. We can be mindful and self aware, so that we can resolve to change.

Today, I want to suggest to you that we can take action to become the hands and feet of Christ in this part of California. We can join God to save the lame and gather the outcast. We can join God to change shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

There are a lot of ways that we can do this, but I want to narrow in on the opportunity we have to be present with others, especially others who are different than we are.

It is not so hard to be around people with whom we share a lot of similarities. It can be easy for us to be with others from whom we think we can get something. Maybe we want to get approval or maybe we want to be around smart, happy, beautiful people because we want to rub off on us.

It is not as easy for most of us to be with disabled adults, or people with shame or depression, or people of other faith traditions. But, we have the opportunity to be like Jesus.

Two thousand years ago God became a human being. Jesus was present with us on this earth for thirty-three years. He created relationships. He spent time with people. He listened to people. Jesus modeled a ministry of being present with all types of people, and we can do the same.

Part of the opportunity that we have to go deeper spiritually is to spend time with people who are often marginalized by contemporary American society, people who are often deemed less worthy, people that push us out of our comfort zone.

Are you squirming yet? Are you feeling a little uncomfortable?

When I met with the three parishioners who were trying to figure out how to care for the other parishioner, we kept coming back to visits. Visits were important to make the parishioner feel less isolated and more valued. In that meeting I shared my own life experience and what I had to overcome to become more comfortable visiting with people.

I had a fear of being with sick people or people with severe disabilities. I had a fear that I would say or do the wrong thing. I had a fear that I would make them feel worse rather than better. I had a fear that one visit would cause me to get sucked in and would create some type of ongoing obligation to do things for the person.

Over the last two weeks I preached about fear versus love, and this week, I'm back on fear again. It's another form of fear of the other. Like you, I have been seeing a lot of fear of Muslims over the last few weeks, and that has colored my experience of Advent this year. But, fear of the other is more than fear of other people who a different ethnicity, nationality, or religion. It extends to people who are sick or people with severe disabilities.

And all types of fear of the other are overcome by just being present with the other.

Sometimes it is easier to be present with the other when a third more experienced person is with you.

Sometimes it is easier to be present when you have done some preparation.

It is almost always easier to be present with the other for the second or the third time. It is the first time that can be the hardest.

Many of you have been through this learning process and are already experiencing the beauty of visiting with others. You know the impact that your gift of time and attention can have on another person. You know the impact that the person you visit

has on your own spiritual depth. You know that your ministry of presence enhances your relationship with God, others and self.

If you have not yet experienced the beauty of a visitation ministry, I invite you to consider whether you have a new call. As a period of preparation, Advent is a time when we should re-examine our own ministries and gifts. You can ask God if you are being called.

God, are you calling me to work with you to save the lame and gather the outcast?

God, are you calling me to change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth?

Come Holy Spirit. Come. Lead us and guide us, and help us know what to do to be the hands and feet of Christ in the South County.