

Homily – Prepare the Way for Love

Rob Keim

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This past week I was talking to a pastor at another church, and he told me that he and others had been working with a young woman at his church who had become pregnant. The woman was twenty-one, unmarried, and didn't want to marry the father. So this group was "walking" with the young woman as she figured out what to do.

My comment back to this other pastor was that I was impressed. I told him that, "fifty years ago, this young woman would have been shunned. The young man might have slapped on the shoulder, but the woman would have been vilified." Instead this group of people was seeing the beauty. They were seeing the best in this young woman. They were embracing the magnificence of this woman's future and lifting her up. Using the common metaphor, the glass is half full and not half empty.

I think we should pause for a moment and celebrate how times have changed. I think it is beautiful that fewer churches are going down the wrong path. We need to celebrate every time we choose the path of beauty and love.

Today's reading from Philippians is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. Some of you may remember that I used this passage five months ago in my first Sunday here at St. Barnabas.

"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

For me this is a passage of hope. It is a passage of joy. It is a passage about beauty and love.

It's an example to us of a community that is on the path of love and is motivated by love.

Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in the city of Philippi.

Paul wrote many letters to the various earlier churches and each letter that we still have today in our canon has a different tone, and a different feel.

This letter to the Philippians seems to be to a community that is much loved by Paul. It seems to be to a community that Paul thinks is getting it right. It is to people whom Paul loves. It is to a people who are focused on love rather than fear.

This is a topic that has been in the news a lot lately. Do we choose the path of love or do we choose the path of fear? As we look into the future do we see beauty or do we see ugliness?

Last week I talked about the end times. Two thousand years ago some thought the second coming of Jesus was about to happen, and they stopped living. When your story is a very short future then this colors the way you live. People and communities grow towards the future they envision for themselves. When there is no future then growth and even daily life come to a halt. In the same way when your story is an ugly future then that colors the way you live.

Conversely, the way that we live also colors and shapes our future. If love is the basis of how we live then that will lead to one future. If fear is the basis of how we live, then that will lead to another future.

Now, let's connect this to the reoccurring phrase that we kept hearing in today's readings.

In our prayer of the week we heard, *"Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins..."*

And in our reading from the Prophet Malachi we heard, *"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."*

And in our Gospel reading we have John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus and fulfilling the words of Isaiah. *"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"*

Prepare, prepare, prepare...

We clean the house to prepare for houseguests.

We get a haircut and perhaps new clothes to prepare for the first day of school.

We clean the gutters and maybe even get sand bags to prepare for heavy rains.

We have many things we do in our daily lives that are preparation. Some of them are easy to do and some of them can be quite challenging – preparing for surgery, preparing to move, preparing to say good-bye. These are not easy things, however, all of these things pale in comparison to preparing for the coming of Jesus. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus changed the universe forever. How are we supposed to prepare for something that alters the universe? What are we supposed to do either as individuals or as a community to prepare for Jesus?

I think the folks who created our three-year cycle of Sunday morning Bible readings had some insight into this. They grouped today's readings about "prepare the way" with the reading from Philippians that talks about love and beauty. To me this means we are to prepare for Jesus by getting away from all of this fear-based stuff that surrounds us. We must shift to love-based stuff. Let me drill down on this because we are surrounded these days by fear-based stuff. The following is from some classes I went to by Rob Voyle on the topic of restoring hope.

To prepare for Jesus we must make sure that our motivations as we prepare for the future are not based on fear. "Fear-based motivations may result in immediate increases in performance, but over time will degrade into resentment, burnout, and diminished returns. Such behaviors are rarely sustainable because they depend on external rewards. When the external reward is removed the behavior is likely to cease. Fear-based motivations also result in resentment and hatred toward the external oppressor...

In contrast, love-based motivations are sustainable because they have their own intrinsic reward that leaves people feeling purposeful, deeply satisfied and joyful. This joy is an abiding joy that is beyond emotion...

Think about the kind of future you want. The path to that future must be consistent with the future you desire. If you want to have love and joy in your future your path today must be the path of love. While it has become politically correct to say that "all paths lead to God," I think the basic idea is wrong. If you want to find the God of Love then you need to get on the path of love. The path of fear and resentment will not lead to the God of Love, but to the gods of tyranny and oppression."

Can you see how love-based motivations have implications for healthcare, for immigration, for terrorism, for gun violence? Or closer to home, love-based motivations have implications on our careers, our families and our community here at St. Barnabas. That young woman that I spoke about earlier is being surrounded by another love-based church.

And love-based stuff has implications on how we prepare the way for Jesus.

In conclusion, we can go deeper spiritually when we examine our own motivations and make sure they are based on love. Some of our nation's discourse seems to be out of fear, and we can be models of love. We can make a difference. As Margaret Meade said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."