

Homily – Light and Love

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Today I want to start with the Good News before getting to the bad news. Today we are celebrating the feast of Epiphany. This is a feast in which we see that our days are starting to get longer again. We remember the story of the wise ones who followed a star. And, we celebrate the Good News that Jesus has come to bring light and love into the world. This is not to say that there wasn't already light. Two thousand years ago they may not have understood the physics, but the main source of visible light was the sun. This did not change with the birth of Jesus. But we also use light as a metaphor for goodness and love. With the birth of Jesus, goodness and love came into the world in a way that changed the universe forever. Today, we may not fully understand how the universe was changed, but we know, we trust, and we believe that the Good News of Jesus is something that changes our lives in 2021.

We often say that God is love. And, by love I don't mean sentiment or emotion, though these passions can be a lot of fun. Instead, with love I mean the noble giving of self that helps us connect and relate to God, and others. The source of all love is God, and the love we give is a response to that original source. We are not the original source of love, but every time we act as the hands, and feet, and voice of Jesus, we are acting in union with the love of God. Now, we might incorrectly think that the opposite of love is hatred. Hatred may be related to the emotion of love, but again, love is better defined as the place we get to when we feel connected. A sunset, the cooing of a baby, beautiful music, sometimes these things put us in that place in which we are standing on the threshold with infinity. We feel connected to the universe. It is this connection that happens when we move outside of ourselves and we live for others. So, the actual opposite of love is not hatred, it is selfishness. The reverse of love is self-centeredness. It is when we can't get outside of our own self-interest. And, by extension the opposite of love is when we only care about our own family, our own tribe, our own country. We only care about the economic interests of our own people. What's mine is mine, and nobody better try to take it. Or, we place individual liberty and freedom above the common good. No one can tell me to wear a mask. Or, we use gender, age, ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, religion and political persuasion to make ourselves feel better than those other dirty people. As churches we are really bad at this one. As churches, we tend to cluster together as like-minded people and demonize and even dehumanize anyone who acts or believes differently than our one true way. My way, my money, my people, my freedom, my way of worshipping God, and others be damned. Selfishness is the opposite of the way of love. Don't you want live in a country that follows the way of love as shown to us by Jesus?

In his letter to the early church in Philippi, the Apostle Paul gets it so right in his beautiful words about the servant, Jesus. “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” As his followers, this is the way of love towards which Jesus is calling us, self-giving, self-emptying, and humble. This is the light that is brought into the world by Jesus, and it is a light that is given to us freely so that we might share this light and love with others.

In today’s Gospel reading we have a man that is the opposite of the light and love we have from Jesus. About forty years before the birth of Jesus, the Roman Senate appointed Herod as king of the Jews. King Herod then went on to conquer Jerusalem from his enemies and rule there for about thirty-four years. Herod is known as a brutal tyrant with a decadent lifestyle. We heard some of this in last week’s readings about the killing of the innocent babies and the way Joseph, Mary, and maybe even the baby Jesus were traumatized. Herod is known for executing several of his own family members as he clung to power. And, in today’s Gospel reading we heard how he attempted to use the three wise men from the East to scout out a potential new rival. I should point out that in the time of Jesus, there were several men with the name Herod. The first reigned during the birth of Jesus, and it was a descendent of this first Herod, also named Herod, who was involved with the death of Jesus. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus exemplifies the selfless love we have from God. King Herod is the opposite. The bad news is that Herod was not the last ruler to be the opposite of love.

Now, at our best America is about love. However, even from the beginning we have had trouble living up to our stated ideals. For at least the first hundred and twenty-five years of our country we exterminated Native Americans who had the land and resources that we wanted for ourselves. And, even in the North, our economy was based on the enslavement of black Africans. While Slavery ended it was replaced by other systems that continued to repress people of color. America has won and lost just and unjust wars and failed to effectively care for the health and welfare of those who weren’t just like us. Our economy has gotten out of sync with the ideals of a country that follows Jesus. In the words of the late Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis, “We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the

hands of a few, but cannot have both.” Somehow through insistent belief in American exceptionalism we refuse to acknowledge our past and repent of current wrongs.

However, because of selfless love, America is a pretty amazing place. In the Pledge of Allegiance we say “one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” That is really quite special. We are all connected to one another, and we are all equal in the eyes of God. Men and women have died so that we can keep moving towards this ideal. Martin Luther King, Jr. wisely said “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.” This past week it was very apparent that we are not united. This past week our President was the divider-in-chief as he encouraged violence and continued to use lies and falsehood to incite vicious division. Americans died because of the actions of President Trump as he tries to cling to power in the same way that King Herod and despots throughout history have clung to power. I am newly ashamed for our Country. I am ashamed of the actions of President Trump, and I am ashamed of all of those who defend his dangerous and appalling actions as justified, OK, or to be ignored as Trump just being Trump. We are better than this. Followers of Jesus are supposed to be better than this. We must remember that “The way of love is how we stay decent during indecent times. The way of love must be our guiding light as we sit, looking around at our leaders, saying, “Something has gone very wrong.” Jesus’ way of love is for those who are fighting hard for a better world, and feeling very, very tired.”

Now some would say that they way of love is naïve. They say that reorienting politics and national dialogue around love’s purpose is simple minded. However, I think that what is naïve is to think that we can afford not to reorient around love. When fear has coalesced into a terrible sickness, the only medicine is love. A worldview centered on love is no less sophisticated or psychologically astute than any other, in fact, it is more sophisticated than any other. It is the only worldview that nurtures and sustains life. God’s power is in love. Or put another way God’s love is power. We must not meet self-serving power with the same. Instead, we must meet the abuse of power with the way of love.

The ideals of America are founded in the way of love. God loves all equally and there is nothing you can do to increase God’s love for you, and there is nothing you can do to decrease God’s love. God loves all. And, God loves our President, but in being the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the world we must stand up to that same President and say enough is enough. President Trump represents the ugly side of our great country and he lives a life that is the opposite to the way of love. We no longer want our President to be the villain of the story. We look forward to a day when we can once again see the love of Jesus in our President, and we remind President Trump that he doesn’t have to have power to be loved by God. Mr. President, the light and love of Jesus is for you too.