

Epiphany 3 – Sermon January 22, 2017

*“...the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”*

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the
kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

Matthew 4:16-17

If you were to step back and look objectively at the typical American Christian you would not be mistaken in thinking that it's a pretty easy life. Here in the heart of the Bible-beating South it seems even more comfortable than it might in a more secular society. The common language of the people is laced with Christian comments like, “God bless you” and “God willing”. How many times has someone I have never met before told me to have a “blessed day”? I must admit to often wondering if he or she actually wishes this for me, or if it is just an empty platitude like, “take care” or “thank you for shopping with us.”

Mega-churches are packing their seats with self-proclaimed Christians and there are countless versions of the Bible from which to choose, even down to coordinating it with the color of one's apparel. Bibles have become accessories like crosses on chains and T-shirts with religious slogans. Christianity is big business and let's be clear there are people out there making a

fortune selling belief and the paraphernalia of faith. How does a sincere follower of Christ recognize the truth within the context of all of the half-truths and mistruths that pass for religious discourse in this egocentric, greed driven age?

If one really seeks to know Christ and desires the truth about God and one's self it becomes necessary to step back from the religious salespeople marketing salvation and look to the source....the Gospels. While Holy Scripture is not a simple read and anyone who tells you it is doesn't understand what they have read, there are insights to be had within the stories about Jesus, his life and his teaching. It is here that we find the foundations of true Christianity. Spending time with the Jesus of the Gospels is an eye-opening, epiphany-inducing practice and it is there that one comes face to face with the truth that most folks would rather not hear.

True Christianity is hard. It requires one to examine one's own heart and mind...to see clearly one's own sin and culpability in the suffering of others and to repent and seek to do better. To follow Christ one must surrender one's self to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, which may lead to shocking behaviors like praying for one's enemies, giving away one's wealth and trying very hard to love those who cannot or will not accept that love. Christ calls us out of our comfortable lives into the messiness and chaos of the hurting world. Sometimes we are asked to leave

our homes and our families for the sake of Christ. Sometimes our loved ones may not be able to accept the decisions the Gospel compels us to make and we find ourselves abandoned by those we love most. Sometimes we are called to stay where we are, to toil in the field at hand, when everything in us wants to run away from the struggle and the exhaustion of plowing a furrow in the rocky soil of our current situation.

In our Gospel today Jesus called his first disciples, Andrew and Peter, James and John. Each and every one of these men left his life and his family to follow an itinerant preacher he had just met. Jesus' very presence and the truth of his message were so powerful they were compelled to step out into the unknown in the hope that Jesus was indeed the one for whom they had waited. We have no way of knowing what, if any vision they had for their future lives or ministry but we can be sure that it was nothing like the reality...the long dusty roads, the exhaustion, the hunger...crowds who could cheer or threaten, religious leaders who condemned, ...but there were also miracles of healing, and feeding...voices from heaven and the loving voice and presence of Jesus himself. They could not know how brief the time would be or how tragically it would end...only to miraculously begin again.

For us, following Jesus can be just as unpredictable...just as difficult...just as inspiring...just as miraculous. When we open

ourselves to the possibility we realize that God is always calling each of us to use our minds and our hearts to change the world for the better. True religion is not something that happens in the mind alone, or the heart alone...but both our intellect and our emotion are called upon to build up the Kingdom of God. Our love calls us into action and our talents and skills give us instruments to make good things happen for the sake of the Gospel.

But don't think the world will always approve of what we are called to do...Jesus was crucified because the powers that be feared his message of love and equality. When we speak of love in a culture of hate, we will be ridiculed. When we cry for peace while our neighbors shout for war we will be despised. When we shelter the refugee, welcome the stranger, comfort the outcast, stand with the oppressed,when we work for change those who profit from the way things are will retaliate.

For those of you who don't know I grew up and spent most of my early life in rural Kentucky. It was there that I learned to love the earth and green things. My first job out of college was at an environmental education center working for a Jesuit priest with a head full of anarchist dreams and wild white hair. He taught me how to harvest rainwater, build a cordwood house and grow an organic garden. He also taught me how to monkey wrench heavy equipment and test the runoff from an unreclaimed strip mine site.

In those days I was young and idealistic and chomping at the bit for an opportunity to chain myself to the axle of a logging truck in the hopes of saving 200-year-old hardwood trees from the pulp mills. I was actually on the FBI's list of subversives for a short while. Not any more, in case you're wondering. I've mellowed in my old age. In those days the neighbors called us "those hippies down on the River". But folks were nice to me because I was born there.

When I left Kentucky and went to Mississippi State to study toxicology and fish physiology thinking I might be of more use to the movement if I had more education, I entered an academic environment controlled by big agriculture. I was called that "bunny-kissing tree-hugger" for 2 and a half years....and while I did once kiss a bunny and have been known to hug a tree or two, I knew that wasn't meant as a compliment.

When I came to UAB to study human physiology, having decided that my future was not in catfish, I found the Episcopal Church, or rather it found me. Every day in the laboratory I worked with a fundamentalist, conservative lab tech who called me a "pinko-commie, gay-lover", except he used a word that was less polite than "gay". A colleague from the lab next door altered it a little to "that pinko-commie, Jesus-girl". I must admit I kind of liked that one.

Later, after becoming a priest I served in California. Walking the streets as a woman in a collar, I was called an “abomination” to my face by the Orthodox Catholic ladies and once a man spit on me while I waited for the train.

My point in sharing these incidents is not to say “oh poor me, things have been so hard.” In fact I have been incredibly blessed to have had the opportunity to serve the world and God while doing work that I loved. No, my point is that in each of these very different social and professional situations there were people who felt it was acceptable to vent their anger and frustration at whatever it was I represented to them. I was not a person, but rather the personification of an idea they found unacceptable. Would they have been more respectful if they had gotten to know me better?...maybe not but it is much easier to abuse someone if you only see the label you've put on them and remain blind to the hurt in their eyes.

Our baptismal covenant calls us to “respect the dignity of every human being”, even those we don't understand, those with whom we disagree on important issues, and those who do not respect us. This is part of that difficult path that Christ calls us to walk. Of course we are not to let ourselves be abused or exploited because we are to love ourselves as we love others. Still, we are to do the hard work of reaching out to those who may not reach back. This does not

mean that we do not speak up when something needs to be said. There are truths that must be spoken and acts of love that must be done. We cannot cower in our comfortable houses and let the forces of darkness overcome this world.

The light that God is shining into the darkness in this age is us and we must be as bright as we can be. We need to be lit up with Christ, glowing with a love so powerful that it eliminates the shadow of death. We are the ones who make Christ manifest to the whole world. We do this in our loving actions for the sake of others. We do this in our worship that calls down heaven and holds it in this space. We do this in the silence of our hearts while we listen for voice of the Holy Spirit guiding us to love. We do this in the depths of our bodies while God breathes new life into this fragile flesh. We do this in the gathering of our community of believers united in mind and heart with the Lord who is always present.

In the First Epistle to the Corinthians today the Apostle Paul calls us to be united in mind and purpose. In this time of great divisiveness where facts are treated as negotiable and every opinion no matter how twisted or ridiculous is given equal weight it can seem like unity of any sort is impossible. But once again I call us back to the Gospels. If we are to declare ourselves to be followers of Christ then we must be of one mind about the foundational teaching of the one we serve. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with

all your mind and with all your strength and the second is like unto the first, Love your neighbor as yourself. On these hang all the Laws and the prophets.” “ A new commandment I give you, to love one another as I have love you.” This is it brothers and sisters...the summary of the Law, the beating heart of the Gospel...the fire in the blood of Christ's followers.

You can make it more complicated if you want to but what good is a laundry list of do's and don'ts? Without love morality is merely a social construct that changes with each generation. What good is bewailing our manifold sins if we don't practice loving each other?...that's just empty righteousness and false humility.

All righteousness is rooted in love. If I love I will repent of the sin of hurting you, because you must not hurt the one you love. If I love I will strive for compassion toward you because kindness and empathy are the fruits of love. If I love I will not commit violence against you or make war on your children. I will not deprive you of the means to make a living or to feed yourself. If I love I will not make laws that oppress you. I will not label you or shun you....make you feel unwelcome or build a wall to keep you out. If I love I will bind up your wounds and pray for your healing. If I love I will invite you to my table and welcome you as my family. If I love I will be open to receiving that love from you and we will then indeed be of one mind and one purpose.

Brothers and sisters the Kingdom of God is yet very near to us. It is within us ...and among usand it is our love that makes it present in this age and the age to come.