

Homily – The Way of Love

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As Christians we don't always have a sterling reputation.

I think we are all aware of our history and abuses. Slavery, the denigration of women, our justification of wars and killings have peppered our story. The struggle for power and control are integral to our Christian narrative even though Jesus taught exactly the opposite.

And, this is not a new story for the people of God. Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah shows us that the Hebrew society of twenty-five hundred years ago had also gone astray. *“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.”* Five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, our forbearers had gone astray and perverted the way of God.

And, to our shame, it is easy to find sermons on the internet that twist the words and life of Jesus to support horrible things, and we would be naïve to think that this is just a product of history. Even today, Christians are led into evil by Christians. This is part of our story as Christians.

Another part of our story is that we bicker over who has the best way of following Jesus. At our best we like to speak of the universal Church and how this body of Christ is bringing forth the kingdom of God. In reality, we have tens of thousands of Christian denominations that are throwing stones at one another. And, this is also not a new story for the people of God.

Two thousand years ago, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early church quickly fell back into bickering and power struggles. Many of the New Testament letters of Paul argue for expanding the circle of Jesus

to include the Gentile followers of Jesus. And, on the other side, in this morning's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, we heard an argument to the Gentile followers of Jesus who had been pushing out the old fashioned Jewish followers of Jesus. The letter argues that all are equal before God and that followers of Jesus had become distracted by bickering over who is in and who is out.

Again, to our shame, it is easy to find sermons on the internet that twist the words and life of Jesus to support our one way of being church, and once again, we would be naïve to think that this is just a product history. Even today, Christians quarrel with Christians. This is part of our story as Christians.

Many of us have family and friends who point to these part of our story as the primary story of being a Christian. Every bad story in the news just builds onto this negative narrative, and I think to deny this narrative ignores these real concerns from the world. Awful, nasty things have been done, and continue to be done, in the name of Jesus. It frustrates me when I have to bear responsibility for this story, and I feel powerless when "those people over there" do new nasty things in the name of Jesus.

And, this is part of the problem. I will never be able to control "those people over there" but I can control my own actions and behaviors. I can look at myself, and my family, and my parish to see how I am complicit in things that are not of Jesus. I can name things in myself and decide to turn the course of my own life. I can strip out those things that lead me or us away from God and get back to the basics. And, when we get back to the basics, we can do all in our power to make sure that the negative story about Christianity is overwhelmed and overcome by a Way of Love that is faithful to Jesus.

Now, as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, we can follow the Way of Jesus. His way is the Way of Love, and that love has the power to change lives and change the world.

As we heard in this morning's Gospel reading, at many times in his ministry, Jesus of Nazareth was surrounded by crowds. Time and again, Jesus taught the crowds and asked them, "What do you seek?" For more than a thousand years, monastics have greeted pilgrims knocking on their doors by asking: "What do you seek?" Today, each of us can pause with the same question. As much as the world has changed, the fundamental human hopes and yearnings that draw us to faith may not be so different.

For so many, we seek love. We want to know God's love, we want to love and be loved by others and we want to love ourselves.

We seek freedom. We want freedom from the many forces – sin, fear, oppression, and division that pull us from living as God created us to be: dignified, whole and free.

We seek abundant life. That is a life that is overflowing with joy, peace, generosity, and delight. That is life where there is enough for all because we share with abandon. This is a life of meaning, in which we give back to God and live for others.

And, we seek Jesus. At the core of our spiritual tradition, is the undeniable fact that the way of Jesus is the Way of Love, and that way has the power to change lives and change the world.

In the first century Jesus inspired a movement that was made up of imperfect people, just like us. This was a community of people whose lives were centered on Jesus Christ and committed to living the way of God's unconditional, unselfish, sacrificial, and redemptive love. Before they were called "church" or "Christian" this Jesus Movement was simply called "the way." Today I believe that our vocation and call is to live as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.

But how can we grow more deeply with Jesus Christ at the center of our lives, so that we can bear witness to his way of love in and for the world? The deep roots of our Christian tradition may offer just such a path. For centuries, monastic communities have shaped their lives around the

rhythms and disciplines for following Jesus together. There are many such rhythms and one created by our Presiding Bishop and his team is made up seven repeated actions or practices – turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, and rest.

First, we turn. In this practice we pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus. Like the disciples, we are called by Jesus to follow the Way of Love. With God's help, we can turn from the powers of sin, hatred fear, injustice, and oppression toward the way of truth, love, hope, justice and freedom. In turning, we reorient our lives to Jesus, falling in love again, and again, and again.

Second, we learn. In this practice we reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus' life and teachings. By reading and reflecting on Scripture, we draw near to God and God's word dwells in us. When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture, we learn to see God's story and God's activity in everyday life.

Third, we pray. In this practice we dwell intentionally with God each day. Jesus teaches us to come before God with humble hearts, boldly offering our thanksgivings and concerns to God or simply listening for God's voice in our lives and in the world. Whether in thought, word or deed, individually or corporately, when we pray we invite and dwell in God's loving presence.

Fourth, we worship. In this practice we gather in community to thank, praise and dwell with God. We hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, give thanks, confess, and offer the brokenness of the world to God. As we break bread, our eyes are opened to the presence of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made one body, the body of Christ sent forth to live the Way of Love.

Fifth, we bless. In this practice we unselfishly give and serve. Jesus called his disciples to give, forgive, teach and heal in his name. We are empowered by the Spirit to bless everyone we meet, practicing generosity

and compassion, and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ with hopeful words and selfless actions.

Next, we go. In this practice we cross boundaries, listen deeply and live like Jesus. As Jesus went to the highways and byways, he sends us beyond our circles and comfort, to witness to the love, justice, and truth of God with lips and with our lives. We go to listen with humility and to join God in healing a hurting world.

And finally we rest. In this practice we receive the gift of God's grace, peace and restoration. From the beginning of creation, God has established the sacred pattern of going and returning, labor and rest. Especially today, God invites us to dedicate time for restoration. By resting we place our trust in God, the primary actor who brings all things to their fullness.

Now, as I said early we can't change what other Christians are doing that have nothing to do with Jesus, but we can change ourselves and mirror God's love back out into a world that sorely need it. And, like anything that we want to do well, we must practice. We must practice these seven activities throughout our daily lives.

With these practices – Turn – Learn – Pray – Worship – Bless – Go – and Rest, I pray that we will grow as communities following the loving, liberating, and life-giving way of Jesus. His way has the power to change each of our lives and to change the world. His way must drown out that other story and narrative that has nothing to do with Jesus. His way of love is the way of everlasting life.