

Homily – Being the Light on the Hill

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When Jeff and I first moved here to Arroyo Grande we lived behind the high school and had season tickets to the AG football games. When seated in the stands at the stadium you could easily see St. Barnabas up here on the hill. However, as nighttime fell, St. Barnabas faded into the darkness and was no longer visible. Other things were lit up and still visible, but for the thousands of people in those stands, our church was invisible.

So, one of the challenges I gave to our Building and Grounds team is to get the big spot light working again. We already have a very large spot light in the memorial garden that can shine up against the steeple and side of our building. We have the spot light, but it didn't work. It would be wonderful for our church once again to be a visible presence here in the community.

Now, over the last two weeks we have talked about the anxiety and divisiveness that have become parts of our American culture. Our society seems to have lost its character and misplaced a common set of truths that are self-evident to all. I continue to place the blame for this lack of center on our churches, but I also place the opportunity to fix this on our churches as well. Our churches have to lead our society and culture back to the Truths that come from Jesus.

This is no easy task for it seems like the "brand" of Christianity has been hijacked and many Christian leaders say things that must make Jesus weep. It seems like Christianity has become the salt that has lost its taste that we heard about in today's Gospel reading. Does this mean that we are no longer good for anything? Should we throw out the tasteless salt? Should we trample our spiritual tradition under foot?

This all begs the questions, how did Christianity get off course and what do we do about it?

Many would say that Christianity got seriously off course back in the 4th century when it was claimed by the Emperor Constantine as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Jesus taught about letting go of power and control. His life, death and resurrection were all examples to us of letting go of the way of violence and embracing the way of peace. And, Jesus loved the people around him. Jesus loved people.

However, the religion of the Empire supported violence and power even though this was directly opposite to everything that Jesus stood for. Throughout the centuries,

Christianity has done a lot of beautiful things, but it has also become synonymous with violence, bigotry, and sexism. Today, we still have Christian leaders who say things to support violence, bigotry, and sexism. Christianity has diverged from Jesus.

Furthermore, “for billions of people, for a person to be Christian, only one thing matters: correct beliefs. Based on the priorities of many Christian leaders and institutions, we might conclude that Jesus said,

“By their beliefs you shall know them,” or “This is my command, that you believe the right doctrines,” or “Behold, a new systematic theology I give unto you.”

Or that the Apostle Paul said, “Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not the right theory of atonement, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.”

Or that James said, “True religion is this: to have the right concept of spiritual authority.”

Or that John said, “God is a doctrine, and those who have the correct beliefs know God and abide in God.”

In spite of the fact that no such statements can be found in the Bible, when it comes to many forms of Christianity, having the right beliefs means you are in. Certified. Legit.

And, here is something about beliefs that you may not have realized. When beliefs become a primary marker for belonging, religious gatekeepers gain one of humanity’s greatest powers: to excommunicate or expel. In this way, belief-based systems centralize power and provide an easy way to test compliance with authorities. Believing, it turns out, is more about belonging and behaving— and more about politics and control — than we typically realize.

Now, as important as beliefs are to so many Christians, they are not the essential, unchanging, defining feature of Christianity.”

For that we need only look back at Jesus. Christianity doesn’t need to be thrown out and trampled underfoot like the tasteless salt that it has become. However, it does need to repent and discard the things that are not of Jesus. We need to take the light back out from under the bushel, and shine it so bright that the world will once again see that there is a better path towards Truths that are of God.

We need to reembrace the fact that the core of Christianity is not a belief system. Instead, the essential, unchanging, defining feature of Christianity is LOVE.

Two thousand years ago, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were all about love. God went to extreme lengths to demonstrate that love is what should be at the center of our lives.

Love, love, love...

“Of the many radical things said and done by Jesus, his unflinching emphasis on love was the most radical of all. Love was the greatest commandment, he said. It was his new commandment, his prime directive—

love for God,
love for self,
love for neighbor,
love for stranger, for alien, for immigrant, for refugee, for outsider, for outcast, and even love for enemy, as Jesus himself modeled.

The new commandment of love meant that neither beliefs nor words, neither taboos, systems, structures nor the labels that enshrined them mattered most.

Love decentered everything else;

love relativized everything else;

love took priority over everything else— everything.”

And, as we place love back at the center of a spiritual tradition that is truly of Jesus, then will we start to see all of the things that are not of love. These are the things that must be discarded from Christianity. These are the tasteless salts that must be thrown out.

We have an opportunity to follow a way of life that is embodied by Jesus, both as individuals and as a community.

Now, I am guessing that most of us don’t need a church whose primary goal is to police the belief systems of its members. Instead, I think we all want and need a church that will help us live a life of love, with as few distractions as possible. Each of us needs sustenance, encouragement, and help in:

loving God,
loving self,
loving our spouses,
loving our kids, grandkids and extended family,
loving our neighbors, especially people we might struggle to love, and

loving the earth.

I think we each need and want a community that helps us grow in love.

Now, my prayer is that our parish here at St. Barnabas can be such a community.

My hope is that we can be a school which teaches how to have the love of Jesus at the center of our beings and at the center of our lives.

My hope is that we can help you learn how to love all people, with no exceptions. My hope is that we can also discern and see what we ourselves are doing that has little or nothing to do with love.

My hope is that we can walk with one another on a path that leads us each to the most loving version of ourselves imaginable.

We all face challenges and zigzags in life. Some of you are experiencing some pretty serious stuff right now. Without love we could become bitter, self-absorbed, callous, resentful, or even hateful. Instead, a community of love helps us remain open, generous and other-focused.

Here at St. Barnabas we want to be a community of love that arms us each with the skills of love. These skills include:

- “common courtesies,
- gratitude,
- admitting weaknesses and failures,
- self-awareness of our own emotions and attitudes,
- expressing hurt or disappointment,
- forgiving and even reconciling when possible,
- asking for help,
- differing graciously,
- surfacing and negotiating competing desires,
- taking the first step to resolve conflicts,
- upholding wise boundaries,
- saying yes and no,
- winning and losing graciously,
- creating win-win outcomes,
- speaking truth in love,
- speaking truth to power,
- asking good questions,
- requesting feedback,
- expressing affection,

opening one's heart,
giving gifts, and
seeking wise counsel."

I can assure you that if we become proficient in this long list of love skills then we will be a light that shines out from this hill here in Arroyo Grande. We will not be invisible. We will be noticed as the hands and feet and voice of Christ in the South County. People will notice the light of Jesus that is in us, and they will say "how can I be like them? How can I also be a loving follower of Jesus?"

(Parts of this sermon are based on or taken from Brian McLaren's book "The Great Spiritual Migration")