

## **Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany 2011**

Epiphany is a time of recognition; the recognition that Jesus Christ is present, “incarnate” as we church folks sometimes say, born into the world, made flesh, affirming our humanity. That’s the main theme of Epiphany.

There is also another theme: that of repentance, which is an echo of John the Baptist’s preaching and an anticipation of Lent. Repentance is often thought of as private, personal, nobody else’s business, between us and God alone. We forget that repentance also has a corporate nature to it. In the reading from First Corinthians today, we hear Paul chiding those who have divided loyalties. He points out to the Corinthians, and to us, how this mocks the Good News. A church that is divided is not a witness to the gospel. One parishioner in a conflicted church tried to keep the lid on the trouble, saying, “We don’t air our dirty linen in public,” only to find the “dirty linen” was already in the public awareness. Saint Paul knew that division was the antithesis of our call to proclaim the Gospel.

So, we find Epiphany a time of witness and repentance, personal and corporate. The readings today underscore both, and challenge us to set aside our petty differences so that the church can be a place not of half hearted agreement, but of vitality. Our job is to look outward, to see the opportunities for mission and engage in them. That is how we proclaim the Good News to a community, and it is also how we avoid pettiness and conflict.

In addition to witness and repentance, we find a third theme of Epiphany: the call. Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, finds Simon Peter and Andrew and simply says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Is our church a place where people can discover their call? Are there ministries in which everyone can participate? Is our church multi-dimensional: inward and spiritual, outward and mission-focused, focused on the ones yet to come rather than only on those who are already here? Creating a place for new people is often creating a place for people to be

called, just like the cooks at our soup kitchen who discovered they could use their talents on Friday nights to cook food for others.

Epiphany is a time for annual parish meetings. The lessons for today are a forceful reminder that these meetings ought to be times when the church takes council for mission. They should never be times of complaint or hand-wringing. The community can benefit from being recalled to its mission. That call should be at the center of everything we do, every time we meet. When the call to follow Jesus is the agenda, then we will discover that any church can be a place of Good News.

Like Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth we find that Christians think and believes differently. We often view this difference as an attack on the principles upon which we have built our lives and as a betrayal to the faith. This feeling only increases when you add in politics. In recent elections, both sides of the political aisle found inspiration and legitimization from Christian constituencies. Political debates often adopted theological rhetoric, and religious leaders adopted political strategies. The result has been a "winner take all" attitude with Christian groups being particularly brutal toward one another.

These battles are not new. Paul's letter could have been written to us. Christians have been disagreeing since the early church. If we look at the history of our faith, we cannot gloss over the horrible violence in many forms committed by Christians. Civility serves as a safeguard against the threat of further violence or brutality. Christian Civility should be adopted by every follower of Jesus as an important part of the spiritual discipline of our faith.

The word civility shares the same root as citizen. Citizens survive because they enter into the basic contract that they need one another, and that all individual citizens have a role to play so that they might be collectively enriched. Laws are created that grant citizens individual rights balanced by mutual responsibilities to one another. The locus of civility within the Christian life is the kingdom of God to which we are all granted citizenship through our faith. In God's kingdom, we are bound by the covenant of the two great commandments: that we love God and love our neighbor -- even those whom we imagine

to be our enemies -- as ourselves. Civility in the kingdom of God demands a commitment to reconciliation that goes to the heart of the Gospel.

The importance of reconciliation is stressed by Jesus when he instructs his followers not to come to the altar if they are in a dispute with one another. In this age of the Internet, in which anonymous vitriol and cruelty is as easy as a click of the keyboard, Jesus' specific demand that we approach the one with whom we have a disagreement face-to-face offers a profound correction. Personal interaction forces us to recognize the humanity in the person whom otherwise we might easily demonize or dismiss. The more we know about a person, the more we appreciate their vulnerabilities, their aspirations and the reasons for their convictions. Hopefully we might ultimately acknowledge that God is working in her or his life as well as in our own.

The advantage of being authentically engaged with people whose beliefs differ from our own is that it serves as a safeguard against idolizing our own ideology. If we are around only people who nod affirmatively we risk the casual merging our own truth with the Gospel truth and subsuming the Way of Jesus to our own way. When we become adherents of our own certitude, our faith can calcify and stagnate. Christian Civility requires humility, a somewhat under-emphasized virtue among Christian leaders

Christian Civility does not mean that we won't disagree. There is a difference between incivility and disagreement. Incivility breaks down communication, but disagreement between Christians is inevitable -- and even productive. A call for civility is not a call for lack of conviction; rather it is about remaining engaged with those with whom we disagree in the hopes that we might somehow continue to move forward together forging new consensus as we go.

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