

## Epiphany VI year C 2025

So a little reality check here, in a time of reality checks.... Why do you come to church? What draws you here week after week? In a world that is increasingly secularized in which no faith affiliation is a growing "thing" ...what are we doing here? The church, after all, as an institution has failed us time and again to speak its prophetic witness. The Enlightenment three centuries ago turned its exacting lens on the church and its traditions; its inconsistencies; its abuses; its superstitions; its intractable dogma... and found it anachronistic and lacking. Science and rationality and progress became our preoccupation. With the help of new technology it seemed the human mind had no limits; the human imagination was in a renaissance and the church in its fearful institutional malaise could only resist.... Hegel called the Enlightenment the rise of the autonomous self... that the human mind was sufficient unto itself... that the possibilities for knowledge were endless.... It was a coming of age for our species such that enlightened society could set its own course for progress... and not just progress but perfection. The God of heaven to many had lost relevance.

We now have the luxury of hindsight, and we know that the utopian ideals of the Enlightenment foundered. The twentieth century was the most violent in human history... over 100,000 million people were killed in the two world wars alone. And now, in our own age, the middle class, where it exists, is shrinking... the world's capital is increasingly held by an elite few. On a planet rich with resources there is still scarcity of food and water. Modern Democracy is under siege; its vulnerability to the abuse of

power is now front and center... and the planet via our so-called progress is warming dangerously; and we now know through hyper active information systems that the powerful of our world are corrupt perhaps more than ever in our history. We thought we were outgrowing our xenophobic and racist tendencies, but we now know that they are still with us, institutionalized within the structures of our society. Philosophers call our world today 'post-modernity,' a world characterized by isolation and fear, and a smoldering nihilism.... We somehow thought that we, in our culture, were immune. Everything is now up for question; all of our most cherished beliefs are open to critique.... Pundits observe that the church is in sharp decline, seemingly irrelevant in a world collared by cynical skepticism.... So I ask you again, why are we here? And why so committed are we to such an imprecise and immeasurable practice?

Throughout modernity the church made a living on the promise that while there is suffering in this life; while we journey in a so-called fallen world... if one just believed rightly then one would be rewarded in the next life... and in the meantime, the church is merely here for reassurance and comfort.... In the nineteen fifties just after World War two, there was a coinage that spoke of the church as a hospital for sinners; attending to the PTSD of the modern world. Perhaps the great tragedy of our time vis-à-vis the church is that we too bought in to the post Enlightenment obsession with the self; and we taught our people that salvation was an individual enterprise... that salvation was personal... that it was my responsibility to believe rightly and therefore receive

everlasting life, whatever that is... But brothers and sisters, that church is dying if not already dead... and what's left of us is in crisis....

But I don't mean that in a bad way.... The word crisis literally means 'reordering' ... we are in the midst, in institutional Christianity, of a radical reordering... the world has changed and is changing so very rapidly, and we will have to catch up.... But apropos of the crisis, I am so very hopeful... because if there is death, then surely there is resurrection. I believe we are encountering a world of possibility in the church. In spite of our post-modern agnosticism, I believe there is a hunger for God... and lest that phrase sound trite or empty, there are other ways to say that... a hunger for meaning, a hunger for agency, a hunger for honest community.... A hunger for a way to live noble lives... a hunger for truth and beauty.... A hunger for mystery.... Those are all aspects of God; a God with many names.... So I'm here because I want to know God more deeply; to imagine my way into the mystery; and to make God known.... But I'm not so sure that there is any more knowledge for us about God than we already have; perhaps it is the conscious experience of God, our purposeful participation in God's life that we so desire... and please hear this... to experience God is not a solitary enterprise.... It is not an individual pursuit... spirituality is a community endeavor.... There is no personal enlightenment unless it is borne out of community. We can't know or experience God alone, in short. It takes collaboration, and being in relationship. There must be critical mass, as it were. We are less if we are not committed to a faithful community...

Salvation is not personal, but has everything to do with the restoration and viability of community... that is another reason we are here: to engender what Martin Luther King Jr. called the beloved community.... So all that context brings us to our Gospel reading for today.

I say context because we are so influenced and biased by the culture when it comes to scripture in particular and the life of faith in general. Again, it is our acquired habit to look for comfortable words in the Bible and in our faith... to catch a word or phrase to give us a lift for the week.... But today's reading is not one such passage. This is Luke at his subversive best. Luke's Gospel is considered the most literary of the four gospels.... Matthew is the most dogmatic, steeped in Jewish theology and practice; John is the more intellectual and arcane... offering a high minded philosophy regarding the archetypal figure of Jesus; Mark is terse and bare in its rhetoric, offering a stark contrast between the vision of Jesus' teaching and practice, and the obstacles that would undermine them.... Luke is the consummate story teller.... This is the only gospel that has the story of the prodigal son; the only gospel containing the story of the Good Samaritan. This is the only gospel that gives the account of the encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus.... This is the Gospel that we read every Christmas because Luke paints such a beguiling and poignant picture of the birth of Christ... pious shepherds, and singing angels, the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, and the mother of Jesus trying to make sense of it all.

But Luke, I would argue, is the most subversive Gospel. In between the lines of his majestic prose is the edgy reality of the wildly active God among us; and if we are not disturbed we aren't paying attention. The prologue of Luke's Gospel is Mary's song, that we have named the Magnificat. It is the anthem of the Jesus movement, if you will, at least according to Luke; and there's not much comfortable about it. This is my translation of Mary's song from the Greek: My soul proclaims the magnanimity of God; God has seen my humiliation... and the humiliation of generations from age to age; God has used the power of God's arm on my behalf; God has routed the arrogant; God has dethroned princes, and lifted up the abused; God has fed the starving; and sent the rich away empty handed; God's kept God's promise of the ages, ever mindful of God's great Love.

So Luke has Mary here calling for a radical reversal of the structures of her world. A reversal of the socio-economic system. He being political, in short. This is the language of revolution... a revolution not, yet to come, but a revolution in progress, in process, perhaps begun in the beginning of time... ever offering invitation to those who might join and fight for the good. This is not the promise of a coming utopia; this is a call to a way of life, a practice.... And today's passage that we have named the beatitudes, the blessings, is a reprise of the same song, lest we missed it the first time... only told here in the teachings of Jesus in the context of his sermon on the plain. Jesus in short has quit preaching and gone to meddling. He's talking politics here... and you know we thought

church people didn't talk about politics; we are, alas, more comfortable seen and not heard.... We have already seen in Luke the reaction of the Jewish synagogue hierarchy to his teaching... two weeks ago they were ready to throw him off a cliff; and to be sure it is this sort of teaching that got him crucified. But he is teaching the people, those who will listen, how to experience God and how to make God known... to participate in God; knowledge is participation; and he's saying that to know God has everything to do with our common life...

Here's the thing: to know God is to participate in God's project for humanity. To know God is to be about God's agenda; knowledge of God is a practice... and what is God's agenda? To invite hungry people to a meal; to take care of people who are poor; to comfort people who are mourning; to embrace the hated and rejected of our world; and in the next verse: to Love your enemies... and to expect the world to reject you in your efforts, and sometimes even the church... because God is all about change and transformation; and it is human nature to resist, even fear change and transformation; but God will not leave things alone.... Luke is saying that God is on the side of the disadvantaged; that God is biased, if you will, towards the disenfranchised and the lost and the victim.... God is, in short, counter-cultural; shaking to the core the status quo.... Karl Barth, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian said that the preacher should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. So what does this great reversal of which Luke speaks mean in our own context, in our own world? We are advocates for

the incarcerated; we are on the side of immigrants both documented and undocumented; we are against the American Oligarchy and its fascist designs; we seek racial reconciliation; we are for progressive tax structures; we are for shared wealth; we are for healing and health.... We are for fair voting rights, accounting for those who have been disempowered by the system.... We are for treating our poor and our homeless with dignity... I could go on... and you might say these are issues about which we have no business speaking as a church. But I say that anything that affects the well-being and dignity of our brother and sister is our business. Jesus demands it; that is, if we want to live lives of integrity. To live for the Good of our neighbor is to participate in God's life.... But Jesus doesn't stop there: He calls out the things that are not of God. Cursed are you who believe your riches make you self-sufficient; cursed are you who are self-satisfied; and cursed are you who laugh in the face of those who weep... cursed are you if you fail your neighbor. In other words... such a life is unsustainable and devoid of meaning and purpose. God's life that we bear has a purpose; freedom, dignity and well-being for those whom God loves. That calling is not a mere hobby for the woke, a liberal corner of Christianity; that is the Gospel.

This of course is a radical call to Love, to Love at all costs, because there is no blessing without us, the people of faith. The blessings of God, God's favor require and depend upon flesh and blood. Luke is giving us an illustration as to the shape Love takes in the world. We are not self-sustainable. We are intimately contingent to each other.

We are our brother's and our sister's keeper. Our spiritual lives are bereft unless the broken of our world are invited to the common table. And Luke places this in the present time. Some scholars call this a foretelling of the coming kingdom; when things will be set right. But I think this is a description of how we live in the kingdom now. Maybe in God's sense of time and space we as God's people are bearers of God's future in the present day. In other words, where there is Love, there God is, and the world in a moment is as it should be, that is to say heaven in earth.... Ours is to be true to the moment; true to our calling; true to the one who calls us to Love.

I'm here, brothers and sisters, because I want to live fully conscious in the life of God, and to catch others, as Luke puts it, for God's purposes. We are catchers of people, Jesus tells us. I'll be seventy years old this March, and I have witnessed my illusions crumble and fail one after another. My faith in our institutions, including the church is failing, or at least disappointed; but my faith in the way of Jesus fills my heart. And I believe that the way of Jesus is the way to participate in the life of our creator. As flawed as the church may be, it is the means given us for serving the one who first loved us. I want to know, to feel, the truth of why we are here. I believe it is to Love, because Love at last is all there is. It is Love that holds the great mystery... and we have been given in Jesus Christ a way in to all that is true and beautiful about this short life we have been given. This is something that we have to do together... and I rejoice that we are serious about it here at All Saints.... I'm sure y'all know others that belong in this



fellowship on the corner of Ann and Government streets. Ask them to come.... We need all the help in this enterprise of Love we can get. Perhaps now more than ever. To be sure it will be an adventure; it will cost us, this journey into the mystery. I'm in for however long I've got. I want to know what's next in the mythic, imaginative, improvisational, and compassionate mind of God. I just want to be a part of it all.... Are you with me?