

Jan 29, 2023 4th Sunday after Epiphany

Pr. Steve

Texts: Micah 6: 1-8, 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31, Luke 6: 27-38

In the name of God, Abba-Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Word—that we speak about at Christmastime, right? The Word made flesh. The Word—that light in the darkness, which the darkness cannot overcome. The Word that we just heard in the gospel for today [Luke 6: 27-38] knocks us down. That's what the Word is--not some curious collection of ideas about Christianity--it knocks us down. Is that text serious? Really? *Was Jesus just in one of his moods? You know, he's like that sometimes.*

There's one organization which has been dedicated for the longest time to shut him down--what Jesus had to teach. It's called...the Church. Nobody else has tried as desperately as the Church to say, '*You don't have to go there. It's not that bad. Okay, we're just going to be... 'Nice to meet you'.*' The Church doesn't want us even hear these texts.

We're in the season of Epiphany, the Wisdom season. In that Corinthians text today [1 Corinthians 1:19]—We hear *God will undo the wisdom of the wise*--those who think they've got it all together, claim to deliver solutions. [God is] undoing the wisdom of the wise of this world.

It is crystal clear without a doubt--Jesus opposes wealth, power, hierarchy, division, distinctions, because the instrument of their practice is always violence. It requires violence to do these things against others. We do it to others--they do it to us. We know it's true, don't we? Jesus is opposed because he's trying to create the body of Christ with us, and an egalitarian community that is life-giving, caring, dedicated to the well-being of all. And these get in the way--they destroy the possibility of community.

More than all of the other sage, non-violence teachers that we know of--Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Tolstoy, Thoreau, the Dalai Lama, whoever else you want to throw in the mix, Jesus embodies non-violence, *satyagraha*, that pursuit of the truth, and all of them combined--that's how much he loves us. These are not crazy words. These are not fanciful, poetic longings of the heart. Jesus is putting us in touch with Reality. He is liberating all of us through these teachings, which confound us, and intrigue us.

Violence is soulless. Whether interpersonal, or war machine, no center is needed, no heart is needed. It's just parts. It's a clanking machine to run over others. We've done it--it's been done to us. That's violence. That's why it never works--it never improves anything.

Non-violence is soulful. It recognizes the other. It cannot live without relationship. It is the longing for unity of heart and understanding. Last week I shared with you a comment from Thomas Merton, that '*Rarely, if ever, do we see the results of what we're working on. In fact, most of the time, we see the opposite.*' That is really hard. That's where we live, as people of

faith, in that in-between the unknowns. That's why the Church says, '*It's too hard to do that--let's just sell religion to people. Much easier.*'

The crucial thing as people of faith or exploration is the inner change within each of us, this change of heart within us--because this is the battleground. It's not out there [where we] always see the damage all over the place. Here [the heart]. Gandhi was asked, "Do you believe in evil?" He said, "Oh yes, absolutely. Every time I look in here, I know there's evil."

Teshuva is a word Hebrew and Aramaic where John the Baptist among many others say it, to turn and return to God, to return to our right minds. That's the thing that kills John the Baptist, and Jesus picks it up. In Greek, that word is *metanoia*, a new mind, to go beyond your own mind into this new realm of creativity and compassion. In English, that word gets translated as '*repent*'--terrible translation, it stinks to high heaven. Because what is it to repent? To say you're '*sorry. I did a bad thing.*' Changes nothing. Changes nothing. *Metanoia* a new mind--a new way of being, a new way of exploring life, that's what our faith is about. We are called to engage hope and healing and transformation through spiritual energy and imagination, by means of wisdom and compassion, which can't be manufactured.

That's why it's not just a question of political priorities, or pressure. There's a place for politics, but it's not going to deliver on what we actually need. This is why Jesus is teaching, '*Blessed are the pure in heart.*' Now most of us instantaneously disqualify ourselves from that, right? Pure in heart, God lord! But he's asking for that purity of a connection, that probing, that longing--*Blessed are the pure in heart.* Why? Because they see God. We begin to see God in all kinds of places that were surprising to us. As people spiritually mature, we come to love people more and more. And we like people less and less.

Why? Because we start to see the beauty in all kinds of folks--they may not even see it in themselves--whether it's potentiality or just, there's some gorgeous elements to who they are, and we long for them to be set free by that beauty within them. But we come to like people, less and less, because we also recognize the drivel which most of us are exercising in ourselves, our choices, and so many other folks, squandering time on what?

I need to share a cautionary word, as we pursue non-violence in our own lives. None of us are good at it. Good at it. I'm certainly not either. We go back and forth, we try, and then we run from it. That's who we are. That's how we are. As we begin to open our eyes to ourselves and to others, we recognize that bullying, when we do it--or bullies, whether again in our lives, folks, around us, work scene, whatever, or if these bullies are in the Congress. We recognize they are so weak, and they are so ill.

Our attempts to reject violence and speak truth increase bully's guilt. Now this is never publicly acknowledged. All right? But guilt has nowhere to go. That's why forgiveness is the only option. (Some of us have been dragging guilty issues around for I think it's, is it 37 years now or 42? God, aren't you tired of it yet? Forget it!) But this guilt, when it has nowhere to go, eventually

simply explodes--in hatred. And that's where our whole country is right now, we are exploding. Hatred, racial hatred, hatred of women and children, hatred of immigrants, hatred of those who are different.

We have to be careful. We have to be really careful, because we have been called to become instruments of truth. We are called instruments of truth, instruments of peace, but we are not to use the truth as a weapon. That's the real danger. "*Act with Justice. Love tenderly. Walk humbly with God*". [Micah]

The core problem today is not political, but human--to see and recognize the humanity of the other. We just can't see it. Now, politics wants power and results, but he can't deal with unknowns, he claims to have solutions. But we cannot live by bread alone. We cannot live by power alone. We live by every word of wisdom that comes from God's mouth. That's where we must pay attention. That's where we must be listening. And focusing, it is so hard with all of the incompleteness that we feel. It is very hungry. But the inner change, the change of heart, the *metanoia*--this is what requires our focus and love.

Mahsa Amini wore her headscarf improperly. She's dead. The Morality Police couldn't see her humanity. 500 more people are dead in Iran. The morality police can't see the humanity of people in Memphis, or children on the border, or in Uvalde--and the list is endless.

The scandal of the cross is that mercy refuses to abandon us. The cross can fully engage this madness, it knows what it's about. Christ has borne the consequences--the refusal to see the humanity of the other, to eliminate and eradicate, rather than change here [the heart].

Don't make me change here. Don't-- I'm begging you...

And the Cross dies into our transformation, so that we can become whole, and healed, and compassionate, hopeful, and joyful.

Violence depends entirely upon its own calculations. Its strategic thinking. It's incredibly clever. It's the way of the world. Non-violence depends entirely upon God, and the liberating Word of wisdom.

There is no way to peace. [Peace is the way]. [A.J. Muste]
Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.