

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday January 28 2024

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany (Septuagesima)

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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‘If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.’

“Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community.”¹

Words of Martin Luther King Jr.

In our Pilgrims’ Class last Wednesday, we explored the incarnation and how Jesus is the perfect image of God, who came to restore that image in each one of us, marred as it was by the fall from grace. Jesus, himself full of grace and truth, came to restore the broken relationship between God and those whom he had made in his image. There were two little words that kept appearing in our class; those words were *love* and *glory*. They may be short words, but they are two of the most powerful in the Christian vocabulary.

Epiphany is the season in which we think of the glory of the incarnation made manifest in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. That life and ministry gave humankind the opportunity to re-learn how to love as God the Father loves. As we shall sing in the preface of the Great Thanksgiving today, *“Because in the mystery of the Word made flesh, thou hast caused a new light to shine in our hearts, to give the knowledge of thy glory in the face of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

The bible is filled with images of the glory of God – from the creation of the world in the first book of the bible to the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in the last book of the bible. God’s glory is made manifest in so many ways, but ultimately in the life of Jesus who, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, *“is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”* (Hebrews 1:3)

Jesus came to bring humankind back into a loving relationship with the Creator; to live in God’s love, and to be united in that love, thus discovering the glory of God. Jesus gave a new commandment to his disciples to love one another just as he had loved them, so that they might be one and share in the glory that Jesus has with the Father. Listen to these beautiful words from the First Letter of John:

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:7-12)

Notice how John addresses the members of the church community as *beloved*. Notice, too, that we are to love one another not because it is a nice human emotion, but because love comes from God. In fact, God *is* love!

We live in dangerous times, my friends, when glory and love are cheapened because they are rooted in human ambition or the abuse of earth's resources or even of one another. More than ever, the church is called to live the life of the beloved community so that it is God's glory that is manifest in the world. If, like me, you hesitate to turn on the news on the radio in the morning for fear of hearing of yet more division, more violence, more bloodshed, then it is good that we are here today. Jesus prayed this to his heavenly Father:

"The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."
(John 17:22-23)

The revelation of God's glory comes through love, and that means that our Christian communities must be crucibles of God's love, so that his glory is revealed to the world. It is not enough to say that we are an inclusive community where all are welcomed; we have to *live* out the reality of the beloved community. When I was a teenager, I used to hate the signs on all the churches I saw that said "All are welcome!" when it was clearly apparent that those churches did not put it into practice! Paul's two letters to the Corinthian Church reveal that this was a struggle from the very beginnings of the Church's history. The Corinthian Church was very inclusive for its time – with women in positions of leadership; with slaves welcomed into the worshipping community; with different ethnicities in its fellowship; but where it fell short was in its fixation with status, class, wealth, education, and one's place in society. Paul had to take them to task so many times. The Beloved Community is not simply about racial color-blindness; neither is it about gender equality and inclusion. Those are all good and come naturally to a community that is living in God's love. I think living as a beloved community is much harder than dealing with issues – it's dealing with people you don't understand in the first place! It's putting into practice the love that we actually find difficult to share, sometimes because we find it hard to love ourselves! It means accepting change and being prepared to be challenged.

So often, churches are the antithesis of the beloved community because people try to live only in the past and with what is comfortable to them, and when change comes (which is inevitable) they lash out because they feel threatened or let down. We are all made in the image of God, but like the Corinthian Church, we must make sure we do not try to make the church in our own image and likeness. As Dr. King said, "*Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys.*"

Now, his life was not perfect – Dr. King made many mistakes – but his life of contradiction was rooted in the search for that love that is promised to each one of us by Jesus. Here, at Saint Thomas, we are each of us on a journey of discovery; the discovery that God loves us even before we learned to love him, and that his glory is the hope for the world's future. Actions speak louder than words, they say; which is why, I guess, *The Word was made flesh, and we beheld his glory*. My friends, let's try and not turn the Word back into mere words.

1. 'Advice for Living' Article in *Ebony*, November 1957. p. 106