



Daily Meditations

February 17-22, 2020

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 2 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Traci Maxwell, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T.Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT, EPIPHANY 6:

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Pull on Your Boots and Light the Flame

Monday, February 17, 2020

1 John 1:1-10

"...what we have seen and heard we now proclaim to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us..."

Many commentators say that the book called 1 John was probably not written by *The John*, the author of the fourth Gospel, but by members of his community in the later part of the first century after the death of Christ. Merely browsing through the first 10 verses of 1 John tells the reader that this is a safe conclusion, because of the metaphorical language. To me, the prologue to 1 John is clearer than the prologue to the Gospel of John because I just don't think that to the modern ear the use of "Word" to describe *what was with God* works very well. It probably worked better in ancient Greek world where the learned were familiar with the varying notions about what it was that brought the world into being and then humans along with it. John called that "the Word."

Here, the community of John chooses a better metaphor (albeit one referred to in John's Gospel opening) to describe God. The metaphor is stated simply in Verse 5: "Now his is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all." This metaphor has become so widespread that the entire "Star Wars" franchise is built on delineating the lines the Dark Side of Darth Vader and the Other Side represented by the Jedi and Yoda.

We participate as a congregation in the Prayers of the People on Sundays. One portion of the Prayers we are now using says, "We pray that our community...will be untiring in our promotion of the common good, fervent stewardship of the earth, formative education of the young, meaningful participation of the old, and the safety and well-being of all. For we know the Light of Christ shines in the darkness..." The people are to respond: "...and the darkness has not overcome it." The last Sunday we will be using this particular prayer is Feb. 23, so let's all really hear what we're affirming when we say the darkness shall not prevail. Why will it not? Not because Luke Skywalker and Han Solo will crash in and illuminate what we face, but because we pull on our boots and light the flame of Truth ourselves. In the book of John, Chapter 8, we find this quote from Jesus: "I am the light of the world. *Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*"

Didn't Make the Top 7, yet Deadliest

Tuesday, February 18, 2020

1 John 2:1-11

"The way we may be sure that we know him is to keep his commandments."

The followup to that sentence is this one: Whomever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar. And whomever says she is in the light, but hates her brother or sister is still in the darkness. She is blinded by the darkness; she is lost. This statement may not be the ultimate or final example required to illustrate what it means to be lost in darkness, that is, to hate one's brother, but it's the one emphasized by the author in 1 John. Why is that? After all, hate is just one manifestation of sin. And it didn't make the Top Seven list, which includes the sins of greed, gluttony, lust, pride, sloth, envy, and wrath. But hate may be the deadliest of all because of how it breaks and tears apart relationships with others *and* because hatred eats away at our own souls and spirits.

One of my favorite quotes from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is this one: "I have decided to stick to love...hate is too great a burden to bear." The nightly news and daily Twitter and Facebook posts are filled with hate and the results of hate--from school shootings that leave first graders dead to surprise bombings that target enemies officially on the government hate list. Hate is easy to teach and practice. Love is neither. In these days and times, I find myself regretting the hatred I harbor. In this community of faith, I am working, as we all probably are, on turning that energy to love.

Gandhi, MLK, and St. Stephen

Wednesday, February 19, 2020

1 John 2:12-17

"Do not love the world or the things of the world. ... For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world."

Over and over in his letters to far-flung and fledgling Christian communities, Paul often warns about becoming a part of this world, a treacherous and dismal place that, in those days and times, supported life that has been described as nasty, short, and brutish. That world was run by military coalitions and minions of minor magical sects who were in it for the money and the sex and the scene in Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 13. Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, Jesus advises. What he means is that if

you accept what Caesar is and stands for and the world Caesar and his antecedents have produced and maintain, then that's your world, too, and thus you must accept the petty rules of your petty existence. Step out of that world and into the light, however, and the empire may have your body, but it will not have your mind or your true allegiance.

Few are willing to leave behind the world as it is; fewer still are willing to figure out how to change it so that Darkness fades and Light prevails. We engage in endless wars and create new ones, wasting the lives of our young men and women while enriching the 1%. We institutionalize hate and violence rather than constructing infrastructure to sustain and build up peace. That is the world we live in. There is another one. Gandhi and MLK and, for whom our church is named, St. Stephen, belonged to that world, as did, of course, Jesus and Paul. Most of us are aware of what Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesus did, but, St. Stephen's story is also important in illustrating how one man standing against illegitimate authority can make a difference. He died defending the new world created by Christ. Are these people outliers? I believe they are not. I hope they are not. I pray they are not.

Warning Bells in my Head

Thursday, February 20, 2020

1 John 2:18-29

"Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that the antichrist was coming, so now antichrists have appeared. Thus we know this is the last hour."

Certain popular evangelicals with access to fundamentalist media assert that we are at the end times or the last hour, but, oddly, they never quote this text from 1 John, Chapter 2. Instead, they celebrate false prophets as some sort of saviors who will usher us into the last times as the Chosen of the Lord leading the lamb to slaughter to fulfill a foolish prophecy.

These false prophets set off warning bells in my own head. If these are the last hours, shouldn't we be making some effort to get right with God? Well, that never gets into the discussion. But let's consider it. Assume these are the final times. How do we get right with God? First John suggests: Get right with your brothers and sisters. Often we hear Father Phil say this from the pulpit: "Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; render no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor everyone; love and serve the Lord..." Ryan Holiday, writing in *The Daily Stoic*, puts all of this another way: "Most of us are afraid of dying. But sometimes this fear begs the question: To protect what exactly? For a lot of people, the answer is: hours of television, gossiping, gorging, wasting potential, reporting to a boring job, and on and on and on. Except, in the strictest sense, is this actually a life? Is this worth gripping so tightly and being afraid of losing?"

Cheap Grace

Friday, February 21, 2020

1 John 3:1-10

"See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God."

Humanity can be divided into two camps quite simply, according to the author of 1 John. Those who sin are not children of God; those who are righteous and do not sin are children of God. In this text, the writer goes off on a bit of a

tangent to explain that sinners are the children of the Devil. They are sinners by nature.

I probably venture into perilous territory when I suggest that this is an easy way out, long chosen by those who find it hard to explain why some people are bad, really bad, and some are not. The Devil made them do it. I'm afraid I just don't buy that at all. It's the opposite of cheap grace. Human character development and relationship-building are much more complex. I do, though, understand and agree with the sentiment, especially when the author writes that "no one who fails to act in righteousness belongs to God, nor anyone who does not love his brother."

That second phrase was not an after-thought. It seems to be the essence of what the writer is trying to get across: Love is the answer regardless of the question. If we can agree on that, then how do we work to institutionalize the outward manifestations of love? How do we end wars? How do we keep people healthy and well-fed? How do we treat the stranger? If Americans really believed what Jesus taught, we'd be living in a far different country with far different priorities. What does the Light illuminate when shown in the darker corners of our economy? Why won't we change that?

Love in Action

Saturday, February 22, 2020

1 John 3:11-18

"If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?"

Verse 18 of this chapter sums it all up: "Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth." Amen. Amen. Amen. It's what we do that matters, and in our world today it is easy to see what people are doing. They proudly fill social media daily with the evil they perpetuate.

I began these daily meditations with references to a movie, so let me end in the same way. If you haven't seen "Hacksaw Ridge," please find a copy and see it. You will see love in action. I recently went to see "1917," a movie about World War I, and in this motion picture we see love in action as well, a kind of love that stands so starkly in contrast to the prevailing "standards" of behavior that it should be elevated as an iconic homage to what it means to be truly human in the biblical sense related to us by the author of 1 John, among many others. Spoiler alert: In "1917" a single British soldier risks his life over and over again to save an infantry division that contains not a single soul that means anything to him. What compels him, what motivates him, is an ingrained allegiance to virtue, integrity, honor, self-respect, and love for strangers. He could not live with himself if he failed. In his face, we see the reflection of Christ. If it's what we do, not say, that counts, then what are we doing?

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