

Parish of the Epiphany

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12 Pentecost

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Paul says to the Romans: “You know what time it is, how it is **now** the moment for you to wake from sleep... Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

I love that phrase – put on the armor of light. I can picture each one of us as luminous beings, fully awake, fully present, and surrounded by light which does not allow the darkness in. When I think of Divine Love, that image that comes to my mind – light streaming down and filling us with the presence of God.

For some, this kind of image might be the portrayal of Heaven – all light, no darkness, God’s presence in and around and through us. There are many reports of near-death experiences that involve moving toward a loving and compelling light, as though Heaven is calling us. Some mystics, Christian and otherwise, describe ecstatic experiences of the presence of God – a taste of Heaven here on earth. Perhaps some of you who meditate or pray regularly have experienced a moment of this union with God. If you ever have the chance to hear or read the work of Benedictine monk and scholar Thomas Keating, I encourage you to take that opportunity. He beautifully describes that state of unity with God which he believes all humans are instinctively drawn toward – a momentary piece of Heaven, of divine unity with God, within our grasp.

Reflecting more on Heaven and its nature, today we once again hear those somewhat mysterious words about whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Honestly, I always wondered what those words meant. We don’t even use the word ‘loosed’ in our everyday speech. A couple of weeks ago, you may have had the pleasure of hearing Tom Mousin refer to these words because they were also part of the reading from that Sunday. I like what Tom said – that whatever we do or say here on earth is immediately and fully known by God, and awaits us in Heaven. So we’d better watch what we say and do! I think of the

transparency of God's relationship with us – there are no secrets, we cannot hide from God. But, this needn't be an ominous thing, as in 'darn it; no secrets from God! Now I am in trouble!' Maybe it can be a joyful thing; that God knows it **all** about us, the dark and the light, and still loves us completely. So, having no secrets from God may be another aspect of that divine unity that awaits us in Heaven, and that some believe (myself being one of them) that glimpses of that divine unity are possible here on earth, in our lifetimes, near at hand, and always available. Heaven can be found here on earth.

I am also reminded of Roger's sermon last Sunday (I know, it sounds like I pay attention in church!) where he encouraged us to turn, as Moses did, toward all the burning bushes in our lives; to where God is present to us, in each other, and in our immediate worlds. God is alive, and present and here among us. For me, knowing that God is around, waiting, patient, calling me, showing up in the form of my family, friends, and community – in all of you - that is Heaven on earth. We can be burning bushes for each other; offering a glimpse of some heavenly light. We can put on the armor of light. We can do this by loving each other, by emulating the kind of love Jesus embodied and taught. Paul said it to the Romans: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." "Love your neighbor as yourself." Imagine doing this! Of course we aren't perfect and we don't succeed. Sometimes we are downright awful at it. But the quest, the pursuit, the everpresent call to love, to divine unity – how wonderful is that!

Did you know that the phrase: "Love your neighbor as yourself" occurs in the Bible in eight different places? The first is in Leviticus, then there are four occurrences of Jesus saying it in Matthew (twice), Mark and Luke, and then it is referenced in Romans, Galatians and James. So, I am thinking that God means it. God *really* wants us to do this.

And, thankfully, Jesus is forever giving us tips on how to love like this. Today's passage from Matthew, tells us how to handle a wayward member of the church – by first addressing the problem between two people, then bringing in a couple of others to consult with, then taking it up with the whole community. This all sounds a bit legalistic and cumbersome, but it is actually just a guideline for how to live in community in a

loving way. When we live with respect and in harmony with one another, God's heart is pleased and our love brings us that much closer to God.

I recently witnessed an example of 'love your neighbor as yourself', which I can summarize as having three radical components: radical hospitality, radical community, and radical graciousness. Although I am not here to preach about El Hogar, the home and school in Honduras for impoverished and abandoned children, with which Epiphany has a strong relationship - this example is from a slice of my life that happened to take place at El Hogar.

Carlos Israel spent his first ten years of life living in a small dirty shack in a dangerous part of town. Although Carlos's mother loved him, she earned \$1/day which was not enough to pay for his school books, so Carlos never went to school. When he came to El Hogar six years ago, at age 10, Carlos started in the first grade. Although he was a serious boy, he flourished at El Hogar and was happy there, with his new 99 brothers and sisters, three healthy meals a day, and teachers who cared for him. One day when I was there Claudia, the Director of the elementary program, told me that she had terrible news; she was about to call Carlos Israel into her office to tell him that his mother, his only parent, had died suddenly. Carlos had just seen his mom the previous day. Claudia spoke softly, comforted Carlos and stayed with him until he was ready to leave the womb of her office.

The very next day was the funeral. Because this happened last October, when an adult mission team from Epiphany happened to be at El Hogar, Thomas and I were invited to attend the funeral. This was held in a tiny humble two room dwelling. Carlos' mother was laid out with plastic flowers on her coffin. There were about 40 people and about 10 folding chairs. Almost the entire staff of El Hogar was there. Thomas and I tried to stand inobtrusively in the back, but we were firmly put in chairs in the very first row. Thomas was invited to participate in the service; it didn't seem to matter that he neither spoke nor understood Spanish. Carlos read a passage from the Bible. When the service was over, tortillas and beans came from somewhere and plates were pressed first into our well-fed North American hands. Thomas and I did not know Carlos and his small family and neighbors. Yet we were treated like we not only belonged there, but

like we were special, like next of kin would be treated. It made me uncomfortable. But this was radical hospitality and it humbled me to receive it.

After the service, Carlos joined the procession with coffin and shovel in hand, and walked to the cemetery to bury his mother. Thomas and I returned to El Hogar. When Carlos returned later that day, he was received with kindness, dignity and love by every adult and child at El Hogar. One of their brothers had lost his beloved parent. The air had a solemnity yet was full of love. This was radical community.

Our team left a few days later, and at our goodbye gathering while we waited for our luggage to be loaded into the van, the community of El Hogar gathered to give last hugs and last goodbys. To my surprise, Carlos Israel was there and chose to step forward and address us in the gathering. He thanked us all for spending the week at El Hogar, for the work we did, for traveling a far distance. He wished us God's blessing and safe return home. This poise, this thoughtfulness, this stepping up and out of his sorrow, was radical graciousness.

Far from my own family, in someone else's home, and at the feet of a sixteen year old boy who just lost his mother, I learned what radical hospitality, radical community and radical graciousness look like.

I believe this is what Jesus is talking about when he tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. For me this is one small example of many, many opportunities here in this life, here on this earth, to encounter God's light in each other. We can 'wake from sleep and put on the armor of light'. We can encounter moments of divine unity with God through prayer **and** through relationship with each other. We can live honorably; we can "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" as Paul encourages us to do, and be channels of grace. We can encounter God's love through each other. We can be lights for each other; God wants us to – offering us a small piece of Heaven on earth, a taste of divine love – through each other.

Amen.