

February 24, 2019 – Saint John’s West Hartford, Connecticut

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38; Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42

**In the name of God who creates life,**

**In the name of the Savior who loves life,**

**In the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.**

**Amen**

My favorite time of the day has always been that hour or so just before the first bit of light before sunrise. It is in this time that the air is crisp, the world seems to be standing still, and the stars shine their brightest. Walking outside on such a morning always makes me pause in wonder and awe.

What feels like a moment frozen in time doesn’t last long though, flecks of light emerge and before I know it a new day has dawned. The clearness is replaced by light that indicates work to do for the day and challenges ahead. The stillness is broken by cars passing by. The stars, distant delicate points of light, are replaced by a light that bathes everything; while the morning planets – Mercury and Venus – hang on momentarily to remind me of the night left behind.

This moment when the new day emerges and the old fades away is where we find ourselves in this season of Epiphany, this time of manifestation. It is a time when we walk with Christ as he begins his earthly ministry. It is a time of light when we see so clearly why we need God here, now.

I want to challenge you a little bit...Do you remember the Collect from this morning? Don't worry if you don't, not many folks do. But I want you to listen to two parts of it again...

“Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love”...beautiful! And then...

“without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you.”<sup>1</sup>

It starts out nice, but then gets a bit harsh. But if we think about this, are we ready for what we just prayed for? Are we really prepared to be carriers of God's love? This isn't our understanding of love, some Hallmark Valentine's Day version; this is God's love, a gift that is meant to be turned loose, through us, on a hurting world; the singular love that is peace building and life giving. This is the love that comes to life, through death, and transforms all that it touches. Are we ready to love radically?

I hope you're all saying YES!!!

But if you're like me, you're also thinking about how much God is really asking of you. To love as God wants us to love demands

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer, 1979, n.d.*

from us behaviors the world might consider “not normal” or even “dangerous”.

Today’s Scripture gives us the road map to what this kind of radical love is about. Much can be said about this Way of Love, but let’s ponder these three things – forgiveness, trust in God, and reaction.

It all starts with forgiveness. Imagine if God held you accountable for everything you have ever done and repaid it in the same way. If that were the case it would be impossible to be in relationship with God, let alone to love God with all our heart and mind and being. God’s love requires relationship, so forgiveness is needed as the balm for the injuries it sustains over time. It leaves no scar, but instead makes fertile the recesses of our heart to grow into a deeper relationship.

We see that this morning with Joseph<sup>2</sup>. The world would say he had every reason to hold his brothers accountable, bring punishment upon them, withhold their most basic needs, and lord over them his acquired status. He acknowledged their role in what had become of him, but no blame was cast. No matter how much ugliness they had in their hearts, Joseph knew that God would work with what had happened to restore relationship.

Joseph could have made them jump through the forgiveness hoops, but didn’t. You know what I’m talking about – you need to

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<sup>2</sup> “Oremus Bible Browser : Genesis 45:3-11,15,” accessed February 25, 2019, <http://bible.oremus.org/>.

do this, this and this and you'll be forgiven. No, Joseph, through the gift of God's love, showed radical forgiveness to bring about restoration.

And this also requires great trust in God. Joseph trusted God to do two things – work with what had happened to achieve blessing and that forgiveness would fall upon open hearts.

Let's take a look at that first one. We can all think of the person or persons that wronged us. They cost us a job, spread rumors, stole from us, any number of transgressions. We get caught up in the anger and rage against them that it consumes us. It does not have to be this way; God can work with the broken pieces. God took the broken pieces in Joseph's family and restored relationship. God can take the most hellish times imaginable to raise up holy voices to speak truth to power. And, in our own lives, God can take the broken pieces that come from the wrong done to us and create blessing; but we must let go and seek God. We must let go of the anger and rage and seek out God's way, God's love, God's work.

The Psalmist reminds of this today!

“Commit your way to the Lord and put your trust in him, and he will bring it to pass...Do not fret yourself over the one who prospers, the one who succeeds in evil schemes...Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; it leads only to evil.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Oremus Bible Browser : Psalm 37,” accessed February 25, 2019, <http://bible.oremus.org/>.

We have enough anger, enough rage, enough evil. These do not bring about God's love. These do not trust God to work with what is there, and will not lead to forgiveness falling on open hearts.

Years ago I was at a church service with a friend and the hymn "They will know we are Christians by our love" was played. My friend, who is a little bit sarcastic, hearing this line replied under his breath "Will they?"

I don't think he really thought how deep that simple question landed on those who could hear him, but it is a question that has replayed in my mind many times since.

Leading up to the Golden Rule we are instructed by Christ in God's Way of Love <sup>4</sup>– return hate with goodness, curses with blessings, abuse with prayer, theft with generosity, and to turn the other cheek when struck. And further in the Gospel the action/reaction instruction goes on.

We may find ourselves thinking about this and struggling to relate. We don't typically find ourselves around people who clearly hate us and say it, we may feel cursed from time to time, but likely haven't had a curse directed to us, we may not have experienced violence, or had something stolen from us. So, I offer this to you, a stripped down version that might be a little more relatable.

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<sup>4</sup> "Oremus Bible Browser : Luke 6:27-38," accessed February 25, 2019, <http://bible.oremus.org/>.

## **They will know we are Christians...**

From our goodness

For the blessings we leave

When we pray for all, friend and foe alike

For the peace we bring

## **They will know we are Christians...**

By our generosity

When we do not judge or condemn

When we forgive radically

## **They will know we are Christians by our love**

An incident that occurred at a homeless shelter some time ago serves as a poignant reminder of today's lesson. A client returned under the influence of drugs. Throughout and just following dinner he was acting a bit unusual, but doing nothing that prompted serious concern.

He, and several other shelter clients, stepped outside to smoke and he was seated on a bench. Without warning he went into a deep

nod, he had overdosed. If action wasn't taken quickly he would die. 911 was called and another client administered Narcan and brought him back.

The medics showed up, he refused treatment. He then grabbed his belongings and left the safety of the shelter. The guest that gave him the Narcan spoke with him before he left. What he said to him and how he acted spoke to the love God wants to gift to us.

To the man who saved his life all the past behavior, which at times was ugly and threatening, was not a factor. Forgiveness was always there. Even though the word wasn't uttered, love was always there. Stay, be safe, you're part of our community.

The anger was confessed. The man who saved his life made it clear "I'm angry at you right now, because you don't have to do this, you can stay". He could have walked away and let him depart, but didn't. He gave him a bus pass so he could get to a warming center and a couple cigarettes, and parted with the words "If you need help, call". Beyond saving his life, he offered to be a lifeline back to the community...he could be trusted for that.

Despite the difficulties the hero of our story faces each day he is a man of character. A man who is rebuilding his own life, but adheres to a Gospel set of values. He was shown no love by the one he helped, and returned that with love. He returned it with life, trust, and generosity.

I have thought about this event often in recent days, each time seeing a new way God witnessed through one willing to be a

bearer of Christ's light. When we encounter folks like this, the seed of goodness deep in us stirs a bit, breaking open a little further, bringing us closer to that resurrection moment when we die to self, so the Holy Spirit may shine through us.

In the Syrian tradition the time of Epiphany is called Denho, which means "sunrise"<sup>5</sup>. This is the time where the light of the world, Jesus Christ, is made known.

May the love of God break free in us like the light of a new day.  
May the love of Christ be radically in our hearts so that everyone our day blesses us with encounters in us God's love and mercy.  
And may God's Spirit of love carry us and sustain us wherever our journey in this world takes us. Amen

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<sup>5</sup> "Soc-Wus," accessed February 25, 2019, <http://www.soc-wus.org/page.php?id=606>.