

A Sermon Delivered by  
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Second Sunday After the Epiphany  
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Today marks the second Sunday in the season of Epiphany. Last week by way of introduction to our educational unit on Christian ethics in the modern world, I tried to draw a religious line connecting the church calendar with events taking place in the world as we know it today. We live in a very fast paced society, and prevailing current events tend to shape our perceptions and attitudes.

Especially in light of the inauguration in Washington this coming Tuesday I hope what we are doing and saying here in church, and in the various educational forums that follow, relates to the questions that inevitably arise in our daily lives. How do we handle information that has the power to shape both our secular and religious thought; and how do we integrate that material into our souls? For starters, let's see if there might be a way to amplify what Epiphany, and particularly the Epiphany season, is all about. One leading scholar described it this way:

*In Epiphany we reflect on the ways in which God's light in the Son (Jesus) has entered the world, and how the light continues repeatedly to show itself to us. We're invited to see this light and challenged to consider the ways in which we can bear witness to it. But it's a troublesome concept in our culture. Our gaze is stuck to the neon glare of technologically manipulated images, and the pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness seems dimmed.*

Well I don't know about you, but I find there's something compelling about that insight. It has the "ring of truth" that grasps the dilemmas and frustrations we are all feeling living in this modern world, filled with the conveniences that supposedly make our lives better, but at the end of the day, seem to make us feel diminished and sometimes less than human. I'm talking here about our technologies, our cell phones, iPods, computers, washing machines, trash compactors, automobiles, snow blowers, and electric toothbrushes. Strange times indeed.

So what's wrong with this picture? What is missing? I would suggest that as ordinary people – the archetype here being Joe-the-Plumber that we heard so much about in the presidential election last year – Joe doesn't trust Washington, or politicians, or Wall Street, or the media. In fact, Joe is not sure whom he really trusts at all. And let's be honest, there's plenty of Joe-the-plumber in each of us. (A quick foot-note: I learned this past week that Joe has begun a new career – he's now a war correspondent in Israel writing a blog on the internet, and thinking of running for Senator of Ohio.)

Right now in America the individual with the highest approval rating of anyone is Barack Obama. Survey after survey has shown that we share in his optimism and hope for the future of this country. And an NBC poll just two days ago on Friday asked a sample population, reflecting the United States' diversity, to indicate what one specific thing Americans of all stripes were looking for in the new president. And the answer overwhelmingly came back – Honesty.

Meanwhile, for those of us in the church, where we make the audacious claim to be the body of Christ, and see ourselves as the people of God; we too are missing something, and we're looking for something substantive from our ecclesiastical superiors. It's not entirely clear whom we can trust in terms of the hierarchy, and in terms of the bishops, prelates and primates who lead us. (Don't you just love the fancy names Episcopalians use for their clergy?) I am deeply concerned that in the life of the church ours has now become a full-blown crisis, and it has to do with the fact that our trust has been shattered. Once trust is lost, it is not easily regained.

Pastoral trust, especially, the regard that exists between ecclesiastical leaders and laity, is in jeopardy. This unique kind of trust is defined as an act or a practice whereby the parties choose to do something deeply caring in the relationship. The nature of trust is that we hand over to someone we consider trustworthy something of value for safekeeping. We seek in trusting relationships to reduce our vulnerability, and prevent some scary things that can happen to human beings. A Yale ethicist, Barbara Blodgett, has described it this way:

*“To trust someone else is to risk being vulnerable to another. To be trusted is to be given power by another. Three words are operative in every trusting relationship – risk, vulnerability, and power.”*

Now it seems in the life of the church, all this is in peril because of repeated acts of disloyalty. The issue goes well beyond disappointment and regret, it goes right to the heart of our identity as Christians, and it is even more discouraging that these matters are very close to home in our own diocese. All the more reason that they must be addressed, and Epiphany is the perfect season in which to raise these concerns for some illumination and light. Indeed, the light needs to shine on us, so we can see the manifestation of God's purposes in terms of what is happening during this time of perplexity.

As I have tried to prayerfully reflect on this crisis in our church I would contend the real question, the so-called "bottom line" question, is this. How do we overcome the betrayal of trust that has arisen, and not just "deal with it" symptomatically? But how do we get past it, and move forward? Well believe it or not, the answer is actually quite simple.

We tell the truth, and we do it with honest information and education. No "spin." We learn as much as we can. We go to seminars, we take courses, we read books, we participate in Christian education, we receive instruction, we seek deeper understanding. In other words we learn to be informed Christian believers, not automatons who hold to blind faith or ideology; but thoughtful people who hold in tension a delicately balanced view of the universe which is both rational and faithful. The solution is to follow the science AND say your prayers. We can do that because it is God's world, not ours – and we believe in God.

Furthermore, we believe God has loved us so much that he has shown us how to live together in peace, harmony, and with a concern for justice in this very messy and corrupted world we inhabit. Fundamentally, we want to be worthy people - good boys and girls, as well as responsibly grown-up men and women. Our job is to figure out ways to live into the promises we made earlier in our lives, or were made on our behalf in the baptismal covenant, which we renewed just last week at the Baptism of Jesus. Remember, in that covenant we have been marked as Christ's own forever.

Listen to the questions one more time:

*-Will you continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?*

- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?*
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?*
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*

The answer to each question is: “I will, with God’s help.” .....

That is how we overcome betrayal of trust both in the church and in the world. ...**with God’s help.**

The task ahead then for each of us is to set an example and model appropriate behavior, remembering always that faith is a verb, not a noun, and that our Gospel identity as Christians is to actively proclaim the good news of God in our lives.

Today’s Collect says it well...

*Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

Cynthia Anderson, Christian Century: Jan 13, 2009

Barbara Blodgett, “Lives Entrusted”

Bishop William H. Willimon, Christian Century: Jan 27, 2009

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