

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Epiphany 5

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I was talking with a friend this week when she asked me what love is. I offered a definition which had never crossed my mind. I responded that love could be defined as the rediscovering of the self. When she asked what that meant, I responded that in actual fact this was the first thing I had thought about love as a self-discovery and that I might need some more thinking about it. As I thought about it, I came to realize that indeed, love can be a rediscovery of the self. It is the kind of self-discovery that opens our eyes to the needs of others, it is the kind of self-discovery that helps us to recognize the joy inherent in mutual love. There are also occasions where this self-discovery even leads us to cease to love those we have loved before and to see our love run ahead to encounter the other in order to begin something new.

Love as self-discovery can be both micro and macro. On the micro level, it is about an individual, and on the macro level, it is about a community. I think the self-discovery operates in two ways: the random and the constant. The random self-discovery acknowledges the awareness of love, and is often moved by love's sublime invitation to reach beyond the-self. But this self-discovery almost always runs up against the reality of the ego. And in this case, no amount of self-discovery is enough to warrant a movement in a totally new direction, nor is any self-discovery enough to perpetuate a change in attitude. One of Israel's major problems with God evolved around the appropriation of a self-discovery or self-understanding of the love that redeemed them.

Israel's prophets didn't shy away from calling the people to repentance, nor did they hold back from reminding the people of all that God had done for them, especially in delivering them out of slavery in Egypt. These reminders were meant to generate the same sense of affection for God as God had for them.

But tried as they did, the results of all their efforts can be considered mixed. This was not because the prophets were not good in sharing the stories of faith, or directing their responsibilities towards others, but they were dealing with a people for whom no amount of self-discovery was enough to generate a complete turnaround. And so the prophet Jeremiah, being aware of the manner in which Israel's prophets had been treated, sought an escape from the call to be God's light to the nations. He, like Moses, blames an impediment in speech, and then also argues about being too young to carry God's message. But God wouldn't relent, He simply reminds Jeremiah, that even before he was born, he had been known and called to reveal God's glory. Jeremiah's story reminds us that in God's world, wisdom doesn't come with age, wisdom comes to those who upon experiencing that self-discovery, are willing to cease thinking like children and begin to think like adults. Wisdom is made alive when we walk not as a people moved by the superficial rendering of love but as people who have seen enough of God's glory to realize that the response of our self-discovery cannot be random.

For our self-discovery to be random simply suggest that we are still lurking in the silhouette of our childhood self; a place brimmed with immaturity and indecisiveness; a place where the glory of God is viewed with suspicion instead of celebration; a place where we feel obliged to shut the voice of others because we do not like what they are saying.

Today's gospel story reveals the suspicion and hatred that often characterizes places of childlike fantasies. The very attitude which was meted out to prophets of old is here being meted out to Jesus. Jesus is here being hounded by the very people who knew him and had expressed interest in his miracles. In their mind, the Jesus they knew, the Jesus who had a questionable birth, the Jesus whose father they knew, the Jesus who was probably considered to have had psychological issues is making a claim that seems to have really gotten to the temple leadership.

Not that Jesus said anything different from what the prophets of old have said, the new revelation here is that those who were in the temple with Jesus, who had known Jesus as the carpenter's son were witnessing the fulfillment of Israel's prophecies in Jesus, and they did not like it. And because they did not like what he said, they drove him to the brow of the hill so they might push him over, and because they did not like what Jeremiah said, they put him in a well.

The second aspect of self-discovery is the constant awareness of a love which bruises the ego that always seeks to dominate and convince us that since the world revolves around us, we should always seek to be the center of attraction, and that all our efforts should be geared towards fulfilling the unique demands of the self.

Paul in his love song to a richly endowed Church in Corinth argues that as worthy as all their gifts may be, they were lacking because of self-love, self-praise and self-interest; most important of all, they were lacking in their indifference towards the community.

He argues that "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not

have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Paul’s argument centers on the fact that in our self-discovery, the love we experience, and the love we give; the hunger for recognition and the greed for money and possession disappear. In the flood of love, the whole joy of God is with us, that is why without love the best human gifts and achievements, the most elevated religious feelings and the wisest knowledge remain empty.

In Paul’s mind therefore, there is no way we could experience Jesus and still hold on to the immaturity and attitudes of our previous lives. For if as children we were immature and did not understand that it is the divine power of love that lifts people out of themselves and lets them forget their own ego, now as adults, who have shed their childish ways and are matured; now we do. If as children we were immature and did not understand that our pursuit of love can bring the light of Christ to those who sit in darkness, as spiritually matured adults, now we do. If as children we were immature and did not know that union with others makes love creative, now as matured adults who have put away childish way, we do. If as children we did not fully appreciate the effects of our actions on others, now we do.

It is the rediscovery that gives life to love, in that; we always have more than enough reason to share the highest virtue of life with others. For it is the virtue of love that offers us the extraordinary power to create, sustain and build our own lives and the lives of those within our communities and beyond. So go ahead, for the sake of yourself and community, pursue love, not randomly, but constantly, for there is no fear in love. Amen.