

February 3, 2019 Sermon

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At each vestry meeting a member shares a meditation. It may be the writings of someone, a biblical passage, or something written by the vestry member. In November, I shared something I wrote, and later asked Father Manny if the thoughts I expressed might form the basis of a sermon. He said yes. I began the writing of today's sermon with great confidence, but as this day approached I had more and more trepidation, but not the trepidation that Father Manny must be feeling, as he has not reviewed my remarks.

What I would like to share with you is where my faith journey has led me, knowing that each of us has wound up in a slightly different place as a result of our own spiritual travels. While I will draw a little bit on today's lesson from Corinthians, I most certainly am not a Biblical scholar, so I will leave it to Father Manny to clean up after me next week. I will draw some inspiration from the sermons of Archbishop (now Roman Catholic saint) Oscar Romero who was assassinated by right wing gunmen while saying mass in San Salvador, El Salvador. Archbishop Romero strongly believed that sermons should use the Gospel to stir recognition of social injustices. Another source will be the great American philosopher (called by some humorist) Mark Twain.

What I intend to focus on is what God has given us. My qualifications for being where I stand at this moment are limited at best. I took theology at an Episcopal boarding school, and I suspect like many of my other grades, my theology grades were mediocre. I read the Bible, but my knowledge

is likely also mediocre, and I am certainly no more qualified than any of you to explain what any passage of the Bible means.

What I can tell you is my belief in what we have been given by God. We are all blessed and cursed — and it is God's fault. One of the blessings and the curses in my life was a Jesuit education at Georgetown University. Recently when I attended a graduation ceremony at Catholic University, a Roman Catholic Cardinal referred to Georgetown as that “so-called” Catholic university across town. When I entered Georgetown, non-Roman Catholics were not required to take theology, but instead were required to take philosophy – taught by a Jesuit. In the Fall after I graduated from Georgetown, the University began a course which continues today, called "The Problem of God." It is required of all incoming freshmen regardless of their religious background. It essentially explores six questions, "Who am I, Why am I here, Where am I going, Who is God, Why is God, and finally Is God?" That we were created with the ability ask these questions is a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because God gave us an intellect, and it is a curse, because God, if He Is, forces uncertainty upon us. As explained by the Hindu chaplain at Georgetown (yes, there is one, unlike at Catholic University), the purpose of the course is to create a lifelong connection to Jesuit spirituality. A person might be a good Catholic, but the Ignatian (St. Ignatius of Loyola was the founder of the Jesuits) approach to spirituality asks for a little more than the basic: "I know how it is: This is black, this is white, there is no gray." Ignatian spirituality says to find the gray and “live in it, and this will result in progress that the world desperately needs at this time." I realize that some do not see it that way. There are those who wake up in the morning, pray, and know with certainty what God is telling them to do that day. Mark Twain described such people as having the confidence of a Christian with four aces. Some of you may have that confidence, and perhaps I

should be jealous, but my Jesuit education teaches me that I am a Christian but am probably only holding a pair of deuces.

This is much different than the possibly apocryphal story relayed by Benjamin Franklin in his closing argument to the United States Constitutional convention. That Richard Steele, an Anglican told the Pope, that the only difference between our Churches is in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrines. The Church of Rome is infallible, and the Church of England is never in the wrong. I think we have all observed the fallibility and the wrongness of both. The first time I observed this was in 1964 when Mary Peabody, wife of a retired Episcopalian Bishop and mother of Endicott Chubb Peabody, then Governor of Massachusetts, spent two days in a St. Augustine jail after joining civil rights activists in trying to attend an Episcopal Church. My limited Biblical scholarship did not bring to mind any words of Jesus that would sanction this.

However, God's greatest blessing and curse, if He is, was that we have free will. That free will enabled a Raul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat to save the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Holocaust eventually costing him his own life. That free will also allowed the commission of the unspeakable crimes of the Holocaust. We also know that the blessing and curse of free will allows us to do good things for others, whether it is serving a meal to the homeless, mentoring a child, or helping to support a Ugandan orphan. At the same time, each of us does things through free will which we know we shouldn't do and for which we seek God's forgiveness. Whether it is ill treating a colleague or yelling at a driver, "Sir please do not cut me off again" ...or words to that effect. As Mark Twain said, man is the only animal that blushes...or needs to.

We also see the gray that God, if He is, has created in the world. The incredible beauty of nature, that we also know can destroy us with God created earthquakes and volcanos and floods, and He has allowed us through our free will to create conditions that make fires, floods and droughts far worse and to despoil his creation. But God has created humans who can be creatures of such beauty through their love of others. At the same time God, if He is, allows cells in our bodies to rapidly divide until we die in agonizing pain from the cancer. All of these contradictions are part of the gray which I live in. If our Christian faith were black and white, we could not acknowledge the goodness of Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, the Muslim gentleman who left a grocery cart full of food during our first food drive or the many other non-Christians who perform acts worthy of any Christian saint. Those who see only black and white, cannot acknowledge that any of these non-Christians are worthy of God's salvation, if He is.

As Mark Twain said, man is the only creature with one true religion...in fact, he has many of them. Why did God allow us to see the Creator in so many ways? Indeed, traditional Buddhism does not believe that there was a Creator, Hindus believe that God takes many forms, we Christians believe there is one God in three forms, our Abrahamic brothers and sisters, the Muslims and Jews believe in God in only one form. I have left many of our one, true religions out. How and why did God, if He is, allow this? A sense of humor? Probably not. A love of the diversity of his creation. Possibly, but I don't know.

Love is the theme of today's Epistle, so I will wander over there for a moment. In the Epistle, St. Paul was writing in Greek. Greek has a number of words for love. There is eros, or erotic love. Paul certainly did use the word eros in his letter. As one who was familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, he most certainly knew he could not top the Song of Solomon on that subject. He did not use phylia, which is the love between friends. Nor did he use storge, family love such as the love of a parent for a child. In his letter he instead used the word agape. Agape, the love of which Paul was speaking is the charitable love that one has of others and that God has for his Creation. Agape, the love that Paul commanded, is the love that those who feed the homeless, the refugees, and the victims of a hurricane show

Love in whatever form is a blessing and a curse that God has given us. We know what a blessing it is when we love and are loved. But when the bonds of love are broken whether because of a broken relationship, sometimes caused by our own actions, or because of the loss of a loved one, we are in deep pain and this is a curse. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Greeks have another word for this kind of love of ourselves-philautia or self-love. If done in excess, it is a curse. Those with excessive self-love are unable to show agape or charitable love for others. This is a personality disorder called narcissism. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders one of the attributes of this disorder is the lack of empathy for others. Thus, too much love of self, destroys love for others. If we have no empathy, we cannot love our neighbors whether they are across town or across the border. Today we see so much demonization and hate toward our neighbors. This is a curse. Yet God presents us with the love of the many volunteers with the International Rescue Committee, the Roman Catholic Diocesan

Migrant and Refugee Services, and many other organizations which give a loving hand to migrants and refugees.

Recently, I watched a documentary called For Grace. It is about Chef Charles Duffy's opening of a restaurant in Chicago called Grace. It is about love and brokenness. Chef Duffy wanted Grace to be the best restaurant in the United States, and it certainly became one of the best, earning 3 Michelin stars. It was preceded by brokenness and love. He grew up in a dysfunctional home and had a chip on his shoulder when he took a mandatory home economics course as an 11-year-old. He had the good fortune (God's grace?) of having a teacher, Ruth Snider, who nurtured him. He took two more years of home ec with Ms. Snider and developed a love of cooking. When Duffy was 19 his father murdered his mother and then died by suicide. Ruth Snider was there for him even though he was no longer her student. She continued to be there for him as his career developed and when his marriage broke up, largely because of the toll his profession's long hours took on his relationship. Finally, she was there as his guest of honor when Restaurant Grace opened. We don't know what if any religious beliefs Duffy and Snider have, but it is clear that Snider exhibits Christian love at its finest.

I want to give an aside to the acolytes, the youth choir and the other young people here. At their age, I could allot about two minutes attention to most sermons. If that is the case with you, please give me that time now. When I was in boarding school, we were taught to ask the same question throughout life. Is the world a better place because I am an education Christian lady or gentleman? I hope you will frequently ask that question and always be able to answer yes. Making the world a

better place, does not require you to find a cure for cancer or end global warming, although that would be great. When you befriend and support a fellow student who is bullied, when you give a smile and a sandwich to a homeless person, when you pick up a piece of trash that someone has carelessly dropped, you are making the world a better place. Most of you will at some time have doubts about God, especially when you face tragedy, whether it be the loss of a family member, a friend, or witnessing cruelty or facing disease or injury. That is part of living in the grey. But as long as you are trying to make the world a better place, know that God, if he is, is the One leading you in that direction. The one who has given you the ability to love.

Thus, we see that life is full of God's blessings and curses. All of these blessings and curses could lead me to question who is God and ultimately Is God? Like St. Thomas I want to touch Him. All of this place me firmly in the Ignatian grey area. I have no empirical proof that He is, but ultimately, I have faith that He is, because I think that I know who I am, why I am here, and where I am going. I cannot see Him, except when I see Him in the faces, the good deeds and the love of others and in the beauty of our planet and of our universe. God is a problem, which we all have the hope that we have solved.