

“LOVE AGNOSTICISM”

January 31, 2010

Epiphany, Forth Sunday (Year C)

Text: I Corinthians 13: 1-13, Luke 4:21-30

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“We see in a mirror dimly”

This past Thursday, I attended one of the best workshops in Christian spirituality and discipleship ever—something I never expected.

The event and title of the worship seemed rather ordinary; it was the Epiphany Day for clergy with Bishop Councill; it had the same old tired “feel” with the title, “Clergy Wellness.”

However, the leader intrigued me—“the Canon for Clergy Health from the Diocese of New York.” I thought it interesting that the Diocese of New York would devote an entire position to clergy health.

And yet, I came expecting the “same ole, same ole.” What are some of the ways “workshops” on clergy health go? The advice is never bad. Take your day off. Get exercise; spend quality time with those you love. Balance your professional life with other interests.

Like any good speaker, the leader of this event from the New York Diocese, went right for this context—and his opening words gripped my attention—that Clergy wellness and Church wellness have little to do with what we might call the “individual therapeutic culture,” and everything to do with vocation and call.

Clergy wellness is all about “countercultural practices” by spiritual leaders in community and communities with the faith to “jump” for them.

A concrete example: At the service of institution of a Rector, back in September of 2008, many of you presented me with symbols of

ministry—water for Baptism—wine and water for Eucharist—oil for healing.

The Canon from New York said in decade-long experience in working with clergy who get into trouble, or burn out, or commit professional or personal destruction—not one had to do with doing too many baptisms, celebrating the Eucharist too many times, or leading too many healing services.

Not one priest who left the ministry early in frustration and sorrow came from communities that practiced what he called, a “Community of the Baptized.”

A community of the Baptized puts first things first—in its expectation of Priests--and of one another: Four things in fact:

- Preaching the Gospel
- Teaching Adults
- Caring for one another
- The Cultivation of Spiritual Practices—those things that make for the true transformation of one another and our world

He contrasted a Community of the Baptized with other things symbolized with what another Rector asked for in his service of Institution: he wanted to be presented with a Cell Phone, a Blackberry, and a Laptop. Thankfully his Bishop asked for a copy of the Institution service, e-mailed him back one line: “Are you nuts?” And then asked that they be removed.

Don’t get me wrong—the point the canon made was not that all the things symbolized by technology were unimportant—with technology symbolizing perhaps the deepest thing which gets clergy, laity and churches into trouble—which is a relentless drive for growth for growth’s sake and all the preoccupation with the “stuff” of American consumer culture which might get us there.

But this other kind of community, “the community of relentless growth,” if taken as a model of Church, is truly deadly for clergy and people.

So, what is the remedy for true clergy health: relentless spiritual focus on first things—the things around our baptismal promises—the deep love of God, resulting in transformed life among each other.

Now, this was expected. But something else happened in the way the Holy Spirit moved through my experience in an even deeper way but you may be asking, “How all this related to some powerful scriptures, and how related to the way in which seemingly unrelated biblical texts form a profound tapestry of paradox and grace.

Let’s start with a phrase which I found intriguing in a commentary on 1st Corinthians 13: 1-13, Love Agnosticism.

It comes from the spiritual writer Bruce Epperly who notes that we adore all the beautiful language about love but find it hard to deal with a phrase that makes true love in Christian community possible: “we see through a mirror dimly.” Here is what he writes:

“While virtually everyone knows the qualities of love in 1st Corinthians 13: 4-8a, few readers get as far as verses 9-13, which portray the agnosticism of love; that is, although we pretend to know all about those we love and serve, we in fact know, only in part.” We love our spouses, partners, friends, and those we serve in spite of partial understanding. This agnosticism is a gift, a good thing, for when we think we fully know others or assume to know what’s best for them, we are on the verge of objectifying or manipulating them.

“The truth is, another is a Mysterious Other.”

Bruce then goes on to connect this Love Agnosticism with one of the great mysterious of the New Testament: why Jesus’ home town got so mad at him

they wanted to kill him. The literary critic Frederick Niedner has called this so-called “homecoming” of Jesus, “home court disadvantaged.”

Here is what Bruce says: “When Jesus proclaimed the words of the prophet Isaiah to his hometown congregation, his listeners believed that they had he all figured out; they also thought they had God figured out. They believed that they knew all about God and about the scope and limits of God’s love.

Then, Jesus begins to talk about God’s love for their enemies—and foreigners. Hometown boy or not, Jesus violates the theological mores that were at the heart of his neighbor’s faith. That day, the crowd at Nazareth needed a good dose of agnosticism.”

When I think of love agnosticism and the call to “see through the glass partially,” I think to an example of the Community of the Baptized the Canon for New York gave this past Thursday in describing the spiritual practices that should be at the core—not the periphery of Christian community.

Think—Amish forgiveness.

Do you remember the tragic shooting of 10 Amish girls in a one-room Amish school in October of 2006?

Do you remember the unexpected story to emerge from an act of wanton mass murder?

The afternoon of the shooting—an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness at her killer: Charles Roberts. That same day, Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts funeral.

In a culture of war, blaming, finger pointing and vengeance, this response to violence was unheard of.

Yet, it was more than an isolated act. Amish culture certainly teaches the

tenants of Christian love and compassion. But it teaches something foundational to love. Only God knows the human soul fully. Vengeance and revenge are to be left to God first—not we who are God’s clay jars and earthen vessels. Said one Amish father, “Only God knows him fully. Only God knows what HIS family is going through. That is our Christian response.”

Dear friends, ONLY a “Community of the Baptized,” where a Christian family is committed to “first things,” transforms its members and world with the miracle of Love Agnosticism—the miracle of “seeing through a glass darkly.”

We are now engaged in a Mission Plan; there is only ONE primary purpose of the plan—to fulfill the Dream and Call of God in vocation—as a Community of The Baptized—transforming our lives and world as deeply as Amish forgiveness.

It is NOT to be a community of a “relentless drive for growth.” Don’t get me wrong—a Community of the Baptized WILL grow because its life is so beautiful, so electric, so counter-cultural, so interesting, and so compelling that those who do not know the Lord Jesus will want to be a part of it!

The best defense of the Christian faith—with all due respect to apologetics—is a transformed life—in love, alive with the love of God.

Which brings me to the deep way the Holy Spirit touched me last Thursday.

There is a sure-fire way I know that I am not centered spiritually; I break my own cardinal rule for E-mail exchange: don’t write an e-mail when upset or angry at someone! It just makes things worse, does not resolve a thing.

There is something we are losing with all the high-tech stuff—an ability to relate to one another on an intimate

level; at one time, you were upset with someone—and you picked up the telephone or went over to the home. Now we whip out a “hit and run.”

I did it twice this week; but let me tell you the response from one of my colleagues which reveals far more about him than me. On Thursday, I inquired from a colleague if they had received a note I had written, and actually taken some time to put together and I perceived it has dismissive. It made me furious. I suppose like the crowd at Nazareth toward Jesus. How dare he?

I sized him up as jerk, and whipped out an e-mail telling him exactly what I thought. I really knew all about him!

Here is his response which reveals the heart of the spiritual director in the Diocese of New Jersey he is—devoted to the practice of contemplative prayer—devoted to those who come to him for spiritual counsel.

“Please forgive me.”

What strong, beautiful and heartfelt words. Only a true man of the spirit could utter them. O yes, we see through a glass darkly.

Madeleine L’Engle was once asked, “Do you believe in God without any doubts?”

She replied, “I believe in God WITH my doubts...”

Yes, we believe in God, as a community of Baptized, through a mirror dimly...

With cell phones and blackberries in their proper place....

Amen!