

## **love is patient**

Matthew 4:12-17

January 8, 2017

*Silent night, holy night,  
Son of God, love's pure light ...*

Epiphany is the season of light, the season of illumination, the season when the light of the Son of God allows us to see things as they are, to see things as they really are.

And in an era of fake news and willful blindness, of looking the other way and seeing what we want to see, of political speech that is not at all about speaking what is true, but about confusing the truth in order to achieve a desired result, we need that light!

What is that light -- the light that allows us to see? It is love, love's pure light. It is not science, not philosophy, not art, not religion that allow us to see things as they are. These do show us something, do help us understand and appreciate something about ourselves and the world around us, but it is love and love alone that reveals the truth, the whole truth. It is love that allows us to see things as they really are.

And the source of love is the same as the source of all things: God. God is love.

You are not surprised, are you, when I say that God is love? I am glad you are not surprised, because it means that you understand something fundamentally important to your life and to all lives on this planet: God is love.

But, think about it! It is surprising, isn't it? Isn't it remarkable and utterly astounding that God is love? Who would have thought it? Who could have invented it?

Consider the universe, the vastness of time and space, so much of it dark and cold and empty. Matter and anti-matter, helium and hydrogen and nitrogen and carbon, gasses swirling and burning. Tectonic plates grinding against each other, rivers eroding the earth's crust, air currents spinning into squalls and hurricanes. Centuries, millennia, eons of history -- changing, evolving, struggling, fighting, surviving, exploring, discovering.

Who would think that the heart of this universe is love? That the nature of things, the nature of nature, the driving force behind and within all of it, is love? Is it just wishful thinking that we say so? Is it just an anthropocentric fantasy that believes that God -- the ineffable power at the heart of the universe -- is love? How do we know?

This is how we know: Jesus. Jesus is the epiphany, the revelation, the embodiment. Jesus is the proof. There it is -- love's pure light.

Pure not because it is ideal, wholly untarnished by the messy realities of this world, but just the opposite, pure because it is real. Jesus is love's pure light because he lives it, here, among us, amidst all the messiness, amidst all the pain, amidst all the jealousies and contentions, amidst all the rejection and misunderstanding. Jesus is the epiphany, the revelation, the embodiment. Jesus is love here and now.

Love is not an emotion. Affection is an emotion, but love is a virtue, like courage or joy or humility, something we choose, something we practice, something we grow into, something we grow up into.

A child may be happy, but not yet know joy. A child may act unselfishly, but not yet be humble. A child may be affectionate and loyal, the true seeds of love, but not yet be capable of love itself. Love is an attribute of wisdom, of maturity, of being grown up, of becoming like God, because God is love. And we see love, we know love, when we look at Jesus, love's pure light.

So let's look. Let's listen. Let's watch. This is our theme for the eight Sundays of Epiphany: love's pure light. Looking at Jesus to know what love is. Looking at Jesus to know who God is.

(Gospel Lesson -- Matthew 4:12-17)

Love is patient and kind. What does Jesus reveal to us about patience and kindness?

*Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!*

Does that sound like patience? Does that sound like kindness?

*Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!*

Jesus' message is the same as John's, the message John had already been preaching out in the desert, not just alike in theme, but word for word the same. We could say this is because John was laying the groundwork for Jesus' ministry, Jesus' preaching, and that would be true. But the reverse is just as true: Jesus is picking up where John left off.

When Jesus hears that John has been silenced by being imprisoned, Jesus takes up John's mantle and makes sure the message is still heard. When Jesus came to John in the first place, he did not come to "take over," but to be baptized. He put himself not "over" but "under" John's ministry. He asked John to baptize him. He accepted from John this sign of obedience to God, the sign that brought Jesus alongside every other sinner in need of repentance.

This is important, because this is the standpoint from which Jesus delivers his message -- not from above, but alongside. This is love: being alongside, being with, not asking anybody to go where you have not gone first yourself, not asking anybody to serve you before you have first served them, but knowing too that sometimes you serve them by letting them serve you.

Jesus preached the same message as John, but not in the same place. John preached in the wilderness beside the Jordan River, but Jesus went to live and work by Lake Galilee. Matthew says this fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, that it would be in Galilee where the people who walked in darkness would see a great light, love's pure light. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.

And what is the darkness?. The darkness is sin.

And what is sin? Sin is anything and everything we do to deny who we are, to not be who we are.

And who are we?

We are children of God. It is sin to deny it, to deny ourselves or anybody else the awesome responsibility and the extraordinary privilege of being God's children. If you disdain someone else, consider them worthless, if you disdain yourself, consider yourself worthless, that is sin.

We are children of the earth, made of the same stuff as earth, made of dust. It is sin to deny it, to think of ourselves as gods entitled to use and abuse the earth and its resources as we please.

We are brothers and sisters, all of us, to each other. It is sin to deny it. It is sin to disown any brother, any sister.

*Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!*

Is it a warning? More like an invitation! The kingdom of heaven is near! The time is near when what is to be will be, when the light of God's grace and goodness will make all things as they should be, when we will know who we are and to whom we belong, and you don't want to miss it! So turn away from your sins! Come out of the darkness into God's light! Come to God's feast! Come into God's house!

This is kindness. Jesus makes a kind and gracious invitation to all of us.

And this is patience. How long have we walked in the darkness? How long have we been deaf to God's call to new life? How long will we struggle in vain to be what we are not, to be our own gods? But Jesus patiently invites us, not giving up on us, not leaving us behind, never believing that we cannot be changed.

Love is patient and love is kind.

*Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!*

Hear him! Hear Jesus calling you! Jesus loves you, and Jesus will call you, again and again and again and again ... until what is near is here!