

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Cycle A, 1.12.2020

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7/Acts 42:1-4, 6-7/

Matthew 3:13-17

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THIS WORLD

Some weeks are just so hectic and full that there isn't enough preparation time for the weekend homily. On those occasions, it's back to the computer files to resurrect a homily from the previous cycle three years ago (or nine or twelve) and refresh the image or the story or the message. Not something a preacher necessarily wants to do, but has to when you can't add any more hours to the day... or night. That was the case yesterday after a full week. On Saturday I had a board retreat with a dozen other board members for CCIH (Contra Costa Interfaith Housing) that went from 9am-3pm. As you know, the mission of CCIH is to provide permanent, affordable housing and vital support services to homeless and at-risk families and individuals in Contra Costa County.



The organization was begun in 1991 when Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian church's homeless task force alerted other churches and faith communities in the area to the

growing crisis of homelessness in our County, especially for families with special needs, like physical disability, mental health struggles or addiction. St. Perpetua, Temple Isaiah and other neighboring faith communities were among the first to respond and form CCIH to address the issue.

At the board retreat, after reviewing the day's agenda with Deanne, our Executive Director, and Alex, our Chief Operating Officer, the first question was *"Is there anything you need to do or say so that you can be fully present at the meeting?"* I thought, what a considerate way to start a meeting – being up front with anything that might distract you from full participation. One board member said that her young daughter was at an event and might need to call her Mom at some point, so she needed to keep her phone nearby, just in case. Another member said that she had to leave about an hour before the scheduled ending time. I said, *"Well, I don't have a homily for the four Masses starting tonight, so I am a bit distracted and I'm expecting all of you to provide me with one."* They all laughed... I wasn't being funny. The meeting was scheduled to be over at 3:00 and I had to be ready by 4:00 for 5:00 Mass.

The next item on our agenda was: *Share a bit about why you joined the board, and what you get from being on the CCIH board.* The responses were heart-felt and eye-opening and gave me the content for today's homily. One member, Barbara, a pastor in Clayton, said that she had been involved in outreach and social issues since she was a teenager, so it was natural for her to serve on a board like this. Mike, a successful executive who has volunteered on the Board for fifteen years, said that he had always adhered to a "top down" managerial style. Working with CCIH he was

“converted” to recognizing that the challenge of homelessness could best be solved from the bottom up -- “one family” at a time. Serving on the board and insuring its success was a way of living out his faith. Karen, who lives in Moraga, admitted her discomfort in living in an affluent community, knowing that a few miles away families were living in their cars or on the streets. Her support of CCIH put her in touch with the vast number of fellow human beings who suffer and struggle in ways previously unimaginable to her. Stephanie said that for years, when she gets off BART and crosses the street to go to her San Francisco office, she passes by homeless people daily. Being on the board moved her from discomfort and anger over the issue to being able to take concrete action to make a difference in her own community. Two members acknowledged their brief, but real experience of being homeless in their own lives. After the twelfth member spoke, as well as our inspiring directors, I smacked the table and said: *Thank you all for providing me with my homily!* And it has two simple points.



The first is God’s call to compassion – a call that resonates with all people – no matter what one’s religious belief or personal status. Our first scripture from the prophet Isaiah refers to Cyrus, a pagan emperor of Persia, who, perhaps unknowingly, acts as a servant of God, freeing the Israelites from captivity and bringing them out of darkness into the light.



And his mission is not limited to the Israelites – *the coastlands will wait for his teaching; his justice will be established over all the earth.* His victory is not achieved by force or fear, *not crying out, not shouting, not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoldering wick.* His ways are the ways of gentleness and patient understanding in the servant’s dealings with those to whom he is sent. What I heard in the testimony of my fellow board members was a spirit of compassion and understanding for those whose opportunities in life are so very different than our own privileged status. Their belief is that by providing opportunity and especially support services for our needy brothers and sisters, we can fulfil the prophet’s mission of bringing forth the victory of justice.

The second point is God’s call to radical inclusion. Love is able to change our hearts. It allows us to see beyond our prejudices and narrow vision, and look into the depth of people and situations. Love can completely turn us around, but the turning can be hard work, like it was for Peter and the first Christians. Our scripture passage from the Acts of the Apostles gives us some insight into the challenge our faith presents. The early Christians had a clear distinction between who and what was

clean and unclean. Their religious rules were strictly laid out for them. They were not yet ready to share the gift of their faith and God's love -- which they had come to experience so powerfully -- with anyone outside the circle of the Jewish community. God had to show them through the example of Cornelius, who represented the Gentiles and all "outsiders," that they had no right to call anyone unclean. God's Spirit was already at work in that Gentile community before Peter arrived and before the disciples baptized them with water. Peter learned a primary lesson, that we have yet to fully understand, when he declared: *I understand now that God shows no partiality*. The challenge is always before us to rise above the false distinctions that society and culture, government and even church place before us. And it's hard work. Jesus radically refashioned the notions of friendship that dominated the ancient world, and his command of loving without measure is today's antidote to our world's pain and violence, all its hatred and division.



I'm grateful to be in the presence of and work together with fellow board members and people in the organization who are Christians of several denominations -- Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans -- with Unitarians, with our Jewish brothers and sisters, with Muslims and others with no expressed religious belief, but who are striving to do good in this world. The impartiality of God is evident in our desire to work for the

common good, especially the good of our homeless brothers and sisters. I'm honored to be among their company.

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A little girl was eating dinner at her friend's house. Her friend's mother asked her if she liked Brussels sprouts. "Yes, of course, I like Brussels sprouts," the girl replied. After dinner, the mother noticed that her young guest hadn't eaten a single sprout.



"I thought you liked Brussels sprouts," the mother asked. "Oh, I do," the little girl said, "but not enough to actually eat them." Like the little girl's Brussels sprouts still sitting on the plate at the end of the meal, our faith needs to be consumed and digested in order to be effective. And Christianity, no matter how much we'd like to tame it, is a radical invitation to sacrificial love; a constant call to change our minds and hearts that they be in conformity with Christ and his mission in this world -- making God's indiscriminate and universal love real and doing so with compassion and concern for our brothers and sisters in need.

John Kasper, OSFS