

Reality Check WEEK FOUR January 30, 2022 Fr. Kennedy preaching

Intro – Series Context

[Screenshot - Series Logo Reality Check]

We are in week four of our series entitled Reality Check

Fr. Mike has been discussing ways for us to be more aware of reality from God's perspective and less dependent on our Echo Chambers.

This week, Fr. Mike asked me to talk about the Synod that Pope Francis initiated and will be going on for another year.

LR is working w/ the Vatican and the USCCB

So it's not strictly a homily but it does fit into our preaching series nicely -

In fact, we can say that the Synod is a reality check for the universal Catholic Church.

What is a synod?

It's really quite simple - a synod in the Catholic Church is an assembly of bishops who advise the Holy Father on the needs of the Church.

There's nothing new about synods.

What is radically new about the current synod is that rather than hearing exclusively from bishops, Pope Francis wants to hear from YOU!

It's the largest attempt at consultation in human history.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN BE PART OF IT.

SPX will be holding online listening sessions via Zoom on Tuesday, 1 February at 7 PM.

For those who can't join us, there is also a survey you can complete. We will also have our small groups do their own individual listening sessions this week.

Please listen carefully to the endnote at the end of Mass for more details.

Allow me to say more about the synod with an experience I had in Cyprus about 12 years ago.

I was in Nicosia; the capital of Cyprus and on Sunday of course I went to Church.

Almost all of the churches on Cyprus are Greek Orthodox Churches.

I went to the church closest to my hotel.

[Screenshot Photo - Cypru 01]

As I approached the entrance of the church, I could see a man handing out slips of paper at the entrance gate of the church.

Inside the gate there were tables set up with metal boxes and people were stopping to fill out the paper before going into the church.

Of course I was curious and asked someone what was going on.

The answer I got was that parishioners were voting for the new archbishop.

[Screenshot Photo - Cyprus 02]

So can you guess what this is? A campaign poster!

This was a mind-blowing reality check for me because I never realized that the governance of the church could be so different.

In the Roman Church, the selection of bishops, archbishops, and popes is a very secretive process.

Voting for an Archbishop was an entirely new perspective.

I came to learn that the process of discernment and governance of the Greek Orthodox Church is much more inclusive of parishioners than is the Roman Church.

Eastern Orthodox Churches hold synods that include parishioners.

Our tradition of discernment on the administration of the church has been almost exclusively hierarchical and concealed.

How did governance of the Roman Church become the exclusive domain of priests and bishops?

One reason among many is that until 100 years ago, clergy were educated and the vast majority of people could not read.

Given their superior academic perch, the typical way clergy communicated with the members of the church was through teaching, exhortation, and enforcing rules.

Now that is simply not the case.

Most of you are a heck of a lot smarter than I am.

So, we need a different form of communication – one that is multi-directional, seeking mutual understanding.

My experience and historical review indicate two important reasons for the current synod.

Pope Francis wants to change the way the Pope gets advice – not just from bishops.

He wants to create a culture in which all Catholics discern where the Holy Spirit is leading the Church.

Just as in the Eastern Churches, Pope Francis believes the Holy Spirit is speaking through the members of the Church just as much as the Holy Spirit speaks through bishops.

Your reaction might be – well it's about time!

Or – this synod is crazy; bishops should be making all the decisions.

You can imagine how many of the bishops running the Vatican feel about this synod.

Pope Francis has been trying very hard to reform the administration of the Vatican from corruption and tyranny to humble service.

Many Vatican cardinals are getting a reality check from living lavish lives as royal princess to being servant leaders.

In his attempt to change the Vatican culture, Pope Francis has faced a tremendous opposition from Vatican insiders.

[Screenshot - Gospel

**When the people in the synagogue heard this,
they were all filled with fury.**

**They rose up, drove him out of the town,
and led him to the brow of the hill
on which their town had been built,
to hurl him down headlong.]**

We see the same opposition to Jesus from the synagogue insiders.

In the Gospel today, Jesus is upsetting people in the synagogue – (Jewish place of public teaching).

Jewish version of preaching, SLAM and small groups!

Jesus was dismissed as a “regular guy”.

Furthermore, he points out to them how God also showed his goodness to Gentiles, they were furious.

Jesus reminds them that Elijah was sent to a widow in Zarephath in Sidon and Elisha was sent to Naaman the Syrian.

When he says something provocative - they want to kill him.

They had a very exclusive understanding of their relationship with God and Jesus provoked them to get out of their echo chamber.

Historically, the insights of the lay members of the church were viewed in the same way by the hierarchy.

How could “regular people” give advice about the governance of the church?

Well Pope Francis wants to know how you think the Church is doing when it comes to listening.

Additionally, the Pope wants to hear from other regular people.

Especially people who are not church members.

Please invite someone to the listening session who is no longer a practicing Catholic.

Please invite some of your family or friends who have left the church to the listening sessions.

We are making a special plea for young people to participate.

This series is asking us to consider a reality check.

[Screenshot - Series Logo Reality Check]

Today I am suggesting that you BE a reality check for the Catholic Church.

If there is a massive response to the Pope's request to hear from you, then it will send a clear message that the Holy Spirit is working in and through ALL of us.

Regardless of any specific outcomes of the synod, wide-spread participation in the listening sessions, will start a movement that can't be stopped by those who are uncomfortable with what "regular people" have to say about the Church.

Please make the effort – reform has to come from the grass roots.

Most of us would agree that the Church could use a reality check – through your participation in the listening sessions, you are the reality check.

By inviting as many people as possible to participate, we are the reality check.

Even though we will not see drastic changes overnight – what we can do is send a clear signal that we care about the Church and we are not ready to give up.

Team Comments:

In focusing on the upcoming listening session on the synod,

we think it's important to use language that people can relate to.

"Pope Francis wants to know how you think the Church is doing when it comes to listening and also accompanying others"

We thought it might be good to focus on Paul's letter to the Corinthians on love.

Perhaps even substitute the word love with "our parish".

Making the point that St. Pius strives to be kind, etc.

Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we fall short.

Same is true of the whole Church.

The synod is a reality check for the whole Catholic Church.

So we want to hear from you.

There will be an online

listening session this coming Tuesday Feb. 1st at 7pm.

Have to sign up to get the Zoom link.

For those who can't join us, there is also a survey you can complete.

We will also have our small groups do their own individual listening sessions this week.

Reality Check WEEK FIVE February 6, 2022

Disney channel: Welcome To Earth science documentary with Will Smith.

In one episode he shared something his grandmother used to tell him,

"God places the best things in life on the other side of fear".

<https://www.axios.com/america-fears-rise-2022-poll-e6684bee-e6bf-41be-919a-caf4cf9fb951.html>

<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2022/01/28/pope-francis-covid-fake-news-242294>

Jesus formed the first small group in today's Gospel.

Reality check:

Don't let fear rule your life off keep you from the life God wants for you.

Like the Apostles, be willing to drop your net and head off in a new direction.

The voice of others can be really instrumental in making sure we are hearing God's voice.

Carey Nieuwhof 12/27:

If you're going to be afraid, be afraid of never accomplishing your mission.

What fears keep us from taking a chance on a small group community? Will I fit in? Will they like me? Will they understand the complicatedness of my life / past? Can I trust them? What will make this time different if I've haven't had a positive experience before? How will I find the time?

Ideally, a small group will keep you honest and on track.

Reality Check WEEK ONE January 9, 2022

The Church's Christmas season officially ends today.

Which means the trees and our Nativity figures will soon get packed away for another year.

Now, you might not know this but we began

planning for Christmas last summer - July 15th to be precise.

This is something the parish staff and I

have done for several years.

With so many activities between Advent and Christmas

we've found it really helpful to get an early start.

And this coming week we'll take some time

to evaluate how everything went.

It's going to be a lively discussion because

Christmas at St. Pius this year was full of surprises -

things we didn't expect.

For example, at the last minute,

several of our key volunteers got sick or canceled.

We also had some staff members who needed to quarantine.

So our plans for Christmas kept shifting.

Mass attendance was another surprise.

In 2019 - which was the year before the pandemic began -

1600 people attended Christmas Mass at St. Pius.

This year we had only had a third as many,

with another 500 worshipping online.

SCREEN: Reality Check main screen

So, these two words pretty much sum up Christmas 2021: reality check!

That might describe your Christmas too.

Maybe your travel plans were disrupted,

or some of your guests didn't make it.

Maybe your celebrations were scrapped entirely.

And that's just Christmas.

We've all found gotten big reality checks over the past two years

with work or school or our plans for the future.

Reality checks in life aren't always welcomed -

and they can be painful.

But sometimes they're unavoidable and even necessary.

Today we begin our first message series of 2022 titled,
Reality Check.

And while I'll be talking about life's ups and downs - like those I just mentioned -
our primary focus over the next 5 weeks will be spiritual.

Because when things in life don't go as planned,
disciples need reminding of who they are and
where they are headed.

Reality checks are opportunities to ask some hard questions.

Questions like,

How do I see myself, others, and the world?

Is my perception grounded in reality?

Matthew Kelly has a great quote about the powerful role
that thoughts play in shaping our reality.

He writes this:

SCREEN: What you choose to think about determines the direction of your life.

Don't like where your life is headed,

change what you spend your days thinking about.

He's echoing St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians,
who told us that we need to guard our hearts and minds
in order to live as disciples - to make room for God and his reality.

Each week of this series we will take a little different focus on how we can do this.

The scriptures we just heard told us how we should see ourselves.

So, let's turn to the readings.

And I'll start with the reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

A prophet is someone who was called by God to deliver a message to his people.

The prophet reminded them who they were and tried to get them back on track.

At the time that Isaiah wrote today's passage,

the Israelites were in the midst of the greatest crisis they'd ever faced.

The mighty Babylonian empire overran their country.

The city of Jerusalem was sacked, their Temple destroyed,

and many citizens were taken back to Babylon,

where they lived as captives for 70 years.

So they were struggling with enormous challenges and had all but given up hope.

If there was ever a time for a reality check, this was it.

And here's what God said to them through the Prophet Isaiah:

SCREEN: I have grasped you by the hand;

I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people,

a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind,

to bring out prisoners from confinement,

and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

So in the midst of their darkest hour, feeling hopeless and lost,

wondering who they were and where they were headed,

God's message is:

I know you, I'm with you, you will again do great things in my name.

With these words, God was reaching out with love

to grab hold of his children.

Reminding them who they were - a people formed in love

and created to be a light to those living in the darkness.

Called to heal and free others.

It was a powerful reality check to get them back on track.

And it worked.

Their captivity came to an end, they returned home and

began to rebuild their nation and their lives.

Six hundred years after Isaiah wrote this,

God's promise of salvation was fulfilled when he sent His Son as their messiah.

And when Jesus was baptized by John at the Jordan River

everyone there found out who he was.

Because we heard that after Jesus came up out of the water....

SCREEN: heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him

in bodily form like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven,

"You are my beloved Son;

with you I am well pleased.”

And Jesus’s mission began.

He went out to preach and teach and heal -
to do the very things Isaiah described.

Jesus’s baptism not only made it clear who he is,
but also who his followers are.

Disciples are those who imitate Jesus’s example of teaching,
healing and sharing the Good News.

What’s the reality check that we are being asked to take today?

Well, remember our definition.

A reality check is when you recognize the truth about a situation.

A misconception you had gets corrected.

In just a few minutes I am going to invite you to
stand and renew your baptismal promises.

But in order for you do that, it’s really important to understand
who you are in God’s eyes.

So I want to speak about two distortions that can
keep you from becoming the person God calls you to be -
that chosen servant Isaiah described.

How do you know if your perception is distorted and needs correcting?

Well, start by answering this question:

SCREEN: How do I see myself?

How do I see myself?

When you look at yourself and your life, what do you see?

Do you see the beautiful creation God made you to be
with a future filled with promise and possibility?

That’s a tough one right now, isn’t it?

The past two years have been hard on so many people.

Between Covid, the polarization in our nation, and the uncertain future ahead,
it’s easy to feel like the captives in Babylon - hopeless and lost,
wondering, where is God?

With thoughts like these, we can all fall into negative attitudes.

Maybe thinking we deserve this or it's a punishment from God.

So your answer to this question

might end up being just a long list of your sins and failures.

And for some people, the way they were raised contributes to this negative view of themselves.

Family members or authority figures kept telling them,

you're a disappointment and will never amount to anything.

Maybe you've heard similar things from those who should have nurtured you.

Maybe you even heard it from the Church.

Catholics of a certain age were raised at a time

when it seemed that all the messages at church

were about sin and guilt and shame.

I heard a lot of them as I was growing up.

Yes, we are all sinners.

And sometimes we all can fall short of our baptismal calling.

I'm not denying any of that.

But if all you see in yourself is what's wrong or broken,

your perception is off -

you aren't seeing yourself as God sees you.

God so loved the world - and you - that he sent His Son Jesus

to suffer and die for you.

When he rose from the dead,

Jesus conquered sin and death forever.

He promises forgiveness and eternal life to all who follow him.

Until you see this reality of your faith,

you won't succeed in your mission of loving and serving God.

Now let me mention a second distortion - another false perception - that can keep you from seeing yourself as God sees you.

And that is thinking you can live your life not needing others.

We have a name for this distortion.

We call it the sin of pride
and we can all fall into it far too easily.
Being fiercely independent leaves no room for others
because their needs don't matter.
Pride even tries to convince us we don't need God.
So we don't make time for prayer or worship.

This past week was the feast day of St. Elizabeth Seton.

Here's a quote of hers that pretty much sums up the attitude we need everyday:

SCREEN: God, forgive what I have been, correct what I am, and direct what I shall be.

-St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

She's voicing the attitude we all need to have.

If you struggle at times to see yourself as God sees you,
St. Elizabeth's advice is don't beat yourself up,
instead turn to God for help.

So today and everyday is an opportunity to recommit and get back on track -
to realign your perception of who you are with God's perception.

And if you're struggling and have some questions about
who you are and who God is, consider checking out Alpha.

SCREEN: Alpha info night screen

Alpha is a program that is specifically designed for those who are skeptical and seeking answers.

Alpha provides a safe, non-judgmental space for questions and discussions.

There will be an online info night this coming Tuesday at 7:30pm.

All the details are on our website and this week's bulletin.

SCREEN: blank red background

So in just a moment I will invite you to stand and renew your
baptismal promises and be sprinkled with holy water.

As you do, I want to encourage you to make a spiritual act of surrender -
asking the Lord to help you let go of anything that is clouding your thinking
or warping your perception.

Surrender any negative thoughts that may be holding you back from the

life God wants for you.

And in this coming week, remember today's renewal.

Remind yourself that the words God spoke after His Son was baptized are words God wants you to hear everyday:

You are my beloved child;

with you I am well pleased.

I now invite you to stand and renew your baptismal promises.

Reality Check WEEK TWO January 16, 2022 FINAL VERSION

SCREEN: Martin Luther King Day image

On Monday, our nation honors the legacy of Rev. Martin Luther King.

To help celebrate his birthday, I encourage you to experience a virtual prayer service in this week's bulletin which was prepared last year by our racial justice committee.

The prayer service refers to a key moment in the struggle for civil rights.

Birmingham Alabama in 1963 was considered to be the most segregated city in America.

Restaurants, stores, even public restrooms had separate sections and entrances for Blacks and Whites.

There was widespread discrimination in employment and disparity in education.

So the leaders of the civil rights movement met with members of the business community to negotiate an end to segregation and inequality.

But business leaders said no.

As a result, Reverend King and others organized sit ins and marches - all non violent on their part - to draw attention to the injustices.

Their peaceful protests were met with violence and arrests.

But they ultimately prevailed - not just in Birmingham but throughout the South.

As I viewed the prayer service, I was humbled by those who were willing to sacrifice so much to overcome injustice.

Where did they find their courage and strength?

For those like Martin Luther King, the answer is obvious.

It came from their faith in Christ.

Jesus's ministry was reaching out to the poor, the hurting,
and those on the margins of society,
and embracing them as children of God.

Reverend King often spoke about his motivation.

God placed on his heart an intolerance for racism and injustice.

He saw the truth of what was going on and knew it needed to be corrected.

He had to speak out, he had to act.

SCREEN: Reality Check main screen

This is week two of our message series titled, Reality Check.

A reality check is when you recognize the truth about a situation.

A misconception that you had gets corrected.

At the start of this new year, we all need a reality check about
ourselves, others and our world.

Last week we renewed our baptismal promises and heard the
message that we need to see ourselves as God sees us -

as His loving children, saved through the death and resurrection of His Son.

Today's reality check directs our attention to how we see others.

And the focus is on these words that Mary spoke at the wedding feast of Cana:

SCREEN: Do whatever he tells you

Do whatever he tells you.

Let's take a closer look at the Gospel reading.

So we heard that Jesus, Mary and his disciples were invited to a wedding feast.

And at a certain point in the celebration the wine began to run out.

Mary asked her son Jesus to solve the problem.

At first, he seemed reluctant.

He said to her, *"my hour has not yet come."*

But then he stepped in to help after Mary instructed the waiters to
do whatever her son told them to do.

And Jesus performed his first miracle - he changed water into wine.

Now, there are so many things in this story I could delve into,

like why Jesus was initially reluctant to help, or why the wine ran out,

but this line spoken by Mary is the one I want to focus on for our reality check:

Do whatever he tells you.

Because for me, this isn't just the command to waiters at the wedding at Cana, it's Mary telling us what our relationship with her Son should be.

'Do whatever he tells you' means acknowledging,

I am not the boss in life, Christ is.

And when it comes to faith and how we live our lives, this requires humility and obedience on our part.

It means surrendering control over those things in life we have no control over.

It means listening to God and following his commands even when it requires sacrifice or suffering on our part.

This is something we can all struggle with.

But it is essential for us to see others clearly.

So what is the reality check here for you?

Start by answer this question:

SCREEN: How do I see others?

When you look at others, especially those who are different from you, do you see your brothers and sisters, children of the one God, or do you see only adversaries or strangers?

As divided as our nation was in 1963, it seems even more divided now.

We are divided racially, politically, ethnically and economically.

And these divisions affect how you and I see others -

including family members or friends who may differ from us on some issues.

The knee jerk reaction is to reduce people to labels:

right/left, Democrat/Republican, conservative/liberal, pro-vax/anti-vax,

Black Lives Matter/All Lives Matter.

This tendency is unhealthy and unhelpful.

Because when we look at others this way,
our perception of them is reduced to the label we give.
It keeps us from going deeper and seeing the child of God within.
We never see them as brothers or sisters.
And it precludes any possibility of a conversation that could bring us closer.
Going back to Martin Luther King in Birmingham,
he wrote a letter to the public, which among other things
outlined how and why he and his followers decided to take action.
First they got the facts about what was actually happening in Alabama.
Then they reached out.
They met face to face with the very people they hoped to change.
They also made sure their own motivations were pure.
They prayed to rid themselves of anger and hatred
towards those who opposed them.
Then and only then did they take action.
I think this is a model that can help you
in relating to someone you may be struggling to get along with.

SCREEN: pray

When someone has done or said something that upsets you and
you feel a need to respond, first pray.
Pray before you do anything else.
Pray for understanding and love for the person.
And also pray for patience and wisdom for yourself.
Let's be honest, when it comes to hot button issues like those I mentioned,
we all think God is on our side, don't we?
But how likely is that?
Rather than pick sides, Jesus encourages us to do as he did.
Jesus crossed boundaries, he tore down walls,
and he built bridges to be with others.
He told his disciples to follow his example by loving their enemies,
turning the other cheek, and praying for those who persecuted them.

Talk about a reality check!

And none of this is possible without prayer.

Sincere prayer will help reveal your true motivations and help you see if you need to rid yourself of self centeredness, arrogance or pride.

The only way to succeed in seeing others through God's eyes is with prayer.

So pray and keep praying.

SCREEN: conversation

And then, be open to opportunities God provides to have a conversation with that person.

And as you've heard me say before, listen more than you talk.

If you are willing to listen with an open mind and heart you can learn a lot about why someone believes as they do.

Or why they did or said what they did.

You might find areas of agreement and common ground that can help you move forward.

Nowadays, very few people make the effort to pray and have a conversation.

Instead they immediately react when they don't agree with someone.

They fire off a hurtful text or post on social media.

Sometimes they even cancel the person out of their life.

Again, let's look at how Jesus responded.

When he encountered people he disagreed with - like the Pharisees - he didn't cancel them, he engaged them.

And in those conversations he challenged their behavior, attitudes, and assumptions.

So to follow Jesus's example, we need to make an effort to figure out a person's motivation instead of assuming the worst.

I'm not naive enough to think this will work every time with every person - it won't.

And I know that what I am asking you to do is not easy.

And I'd be lying if I said I've always done this.

I know I haven't, but wished I had.

Because I know it's what God wants for me
and what Jesus expects from all his followers.

So now comes the harder question for you:

SCREEN: What is God asking me to do?

What is God asking me to do?

I'll bet God is speaking to your heart right now.

Perhaps bringing to mind someone you need to reconcile with.

Maybe you are thinking of someone you've lost touch with.

God might be challenging you to rethink how you use social media.

Maybe God is reminding you to help someone in need.

Or maybe to take a stand against injustice or intolerance or in defense of life.

What is God asking you to do and how will you respond?

Today, allow the Lord to speak to your heart.

To see the reality of your relationship to others.

Today, let us commit to following Mary's instruction about her son Jesus.

May we do whatever he tells us. Amen +

Reality Check WEEK THREE January 23, 2022 FINAL VERSION

I want to tell you about my friend Sam.

We first met 40 years ago on our first day of seminary.

Although we were studying to be priests for the Archdiocese of Washington,
we were sent to a seminary in Cleveland, Ohio.

Being two outsiders in a new city, we bonded right away.

We also found out that we both liked 'Lord of the Rings'
and 'Star Trek'.

After we were ordained we began spending our days off together.

After several years as a parish priest,

Sam became a federal prison chaplain in West Virginia,
then spent a year in Iraq as an Army chaplain.

Even though our ministries took us in different directions,
we stayed in touch.

When he returned to DC to become a pastor, we reconnected.

It's no surprise to say that over 40 years, people change.

Sam and I have different views on politics,

the pandemic and the Church,

which have resulted in some challenging conversations.

But I appreciate having them because they give both of us

a wider perspective on life.

They're always enlightening and get us out of our echo chambers.

What's kept our friendship strong has been finding common ground.

We're both pastors of large suburban parishes, ministering in a pandemic.

We've also found common ground with family issues.

He cared for his mom until she passed away last year.

He asked me to preach at her funeral.

Why am I telling you all this?

Because I think we all have family members and friends like Sam.

At least, I hope you do.

Someone you love and care about even though

you don't always agree on everything.

Someone who can challenge you and stimulate your thinking

about what matters most in life.

Someone who can enlighten you and get you out of your echo chamber.

SCREEN: Reality Check main screen

This is Week Three of our message series titled, Reality Check.

A reality check is when you recognize the truth about a situation.

When a misconception that you had gets corrected.

God gives us reality checks in life to help us see life as God sees it.

So that we can see ourselves, others and our world through God's eyes.

Each week we are approaching this from a different angle.

Week One we renewed our baptismal promises, hearing the message

that God sees us as his loving children.

Last week's message was about the importance of seeing others

as brothers and sisters.

Today's message is that we need to get out of our echo chambers in order to see life as God sees it.

The Gospel today tells us how.

SCREEN: echo chamber

But let me begin by defining this term: echo chamber.

What is it?

Well, the simplest definition of an echo chamber is an environment where the loudest voice drowns out all others.

Echo chambers exist in politics, the business world, in schools, in news outlets, and even in churches.

If you live your life in an echo chamber, the same message keeps repeating over and over.

You never hear anything new.

New ideas, new perspectives, new ways of doing things never make it into the echo chamber.

As disciples, we know that sin can create an echo chamber in our souls.

When sins like pride take root in our hearts, the voice of God gets drowned out.

We only hear ourselves, so we don't grow or change, we become quite comfortable with the status quo.

We get stuck doing and saying the same things over and over.

We can even fall into the trap of thinking that God agrees with us on every issue.

Pride tells us we are never wrong.

The only way out of the echo chamber is to open ourselves up to God.

To make sure that his voice is the one we hear most clearly.

Then and only then will we become the disciples Christ calls us to be.

Let's turn to the Gospel reading we just heard.

So after Jesus was baptized, his ministry began.

And one of the first things he did was return to his hometown of Nazareth.

He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from the Prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*

Then he said to those in the synagogue,

SCREEN: Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.

And you can almost hear them questioning this:

What did he say?

How can a 600 year old bible passage be fulfilled in Jesus?

He's just a hometown boy, the carpenter's son.

He's one of us.

It's impossible that he's the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

Next week we'll hear how they reacted and it wasn't pretty.

Why couldn't they accept Jesus?

Well, the simplest answer is to say that
the people in the synagogue in Nazareth
were living in an echo chamber.

They'd decided they knew exactly what the messiah
would look like and sound like,
and Jesus definitely wasn't it.

Their echo chamber drowned out his message and
any possibility of becoming his followers.

Their hard-heartedness resulted in them rejecting Jesus.

The long awaited messiah was standing right before them
and they completely missed him.

Pretty sad, don't you think?

It's an extreme example and a powerful warning
on the spiritual danger of echo chambers.

What was it about Jesus's words that day that so threatened them?

When Jesus quoted Isaiah, he was announcing his mission.

He would preach the good news, he would heal the sick,
he would reach out to those on the margins of life and
bring them into his Kingdom.

God would not be on the side of the rich and powerful,
but with the lowly, the weak, the powerless.

It was a message that would radically upend the social order.

Jesus's message of love and inclusion was so threatening that it led
to his death.

And he knew it would happen.

As Jesus read from that scroll, he could see all the way Calvary.

The only thing that could prevent it from happening
would be for Jesus to surrender to the world.

And it was a temptation he faced throughout his 3 year ministry.

The temptation to listen to those other voices.

To give in to people's demands to water down his message.

To soften the impact so as not to upset those in authority.

And if Jesus had done that, we wouldn't be here now.

Thankfully Jesus didn't listen to all those telling him to stop and be quiet.

He refused to live in their echo chamber.

He listened to the only voice that mattered - his heavenly Father.

What is the reality check for us?

First, let's admit that to a certain extent,

we all live our lives in echo chambers.

We only spend time with family members who agree with us.

We make friends with those who share our opinions and think as we do.

The same is true with coworkers, classmates and neighbors.

We follow the news on sites whose politics aligns with ours.

And ditto when it comes to social media.

Some of this is natural and understandable and we all do it.

But it's not always healthy because it prevents us from

ever hearing new ideas or points of view.

And in today's super divisive world,

it separates us from those who don't completely agree with us.

We cut ourselves off from people we are called to love and embrace.

So, let's all admit that we exist in some form of echo chamber

and God wants us to live outside of them.

If you agree with this message, here are a couple steps you can take.

SCREEN: pray

The first step is to pray.

You heard me talk about the importance of prayer last week,

but it so essential to live outside of your echo chamber.

When you pray, ask God to give you patience, understanding.

To soften your heart, help you hold your tongue, to see things as others do.

When you pray to God asking him to make you over in his image,

it becomes impossible to remain prideful or arrogant.

Prayer can help you let go of the need to always have to be right,

and be the loudest voice.

Prayer is an essential step and an easy one to take.

so commit to prayer.

SCREEN: widen your perspective

The second step is harder and will definitely take you outside your comfort zone.

The best way to live outside of an echo chamber is to widen your perspective -

to expose yourself to other voices and opinions.

I'm asking you to intentionally seek out points of view

and ways of thinking that are different from yours.

Listen to another news channel than you normally do.

Consider turning down the volume of the voices you regularly go to.

By 'turning down the volume' I mean, listening less

to your favorite pundits or those you follow on social media.

Particularly those whose only goal is to tear down

without offering anything constructive.

Doing this will definitely widen your perspective.

But remember to be open and listen instead of arguing or getting defensive.

Widening your perspective won't cause you to abandon the values you feel passionately about.

That's not the goal.

But it can help you sort out facts from opinions.

It might reveal inconsistencies or weaknesses in your thinking.

Or help you see how certain positions affect others - especially the most vulnerable among us.

And widening your perspective will keep you from being isolated or cut off from those who hold other opinions or beliefs.

I also believe this can help you find common ground with others and help to tear down the toxic divisions that exist.

In this coming week, commit to these two steps:

pray and widening your perspective.

If you do, not only will you be saying "no" to life in an echo chamber, but you will grow as a disciple.

You will be seeing the world and others through the eyes of Christ. Amen. +

--talk to a respected friend who differs to find out why

(That is, listen to understand, not to refute)

--Acknowledge the weaknesses of your stance on a given issue, and hold your beliefs

lightly?? E.g., be willing to change your mind if presented with new info

To listen to the Holy Spirit you also have to listen to others, even those you disagree with.

CUT FROM ABOVE

Who's voice are you listening to?

We all can fall prey to defining our own truth -

we create our own echo chamber, filled only with voices
who think and act exactly as we do.

With the result being a conviction that we are right and everyone else is wrong.

This even leads to thinking God is on our side - always.

Rather than seeking God's truth, we get caught in an echo chamber
that we need to let God lead us out of.

But how can we hear God's voice in a world that seems to be filled with nothing but echo
chambers?

And that's the challenge we face.

When people can't agree on the truthfulness of anything,
when they can look at the same event and draw different conclusions,
finding God's truth becomes really difficult.

Difficult, but not impossible.

And we can't do it on our own.

We need the help and support of others.

In a few weeks we will be launching new adult small groups.

CUT

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

**We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single garment of destiny.**

Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

And making it clear, the time is now.

Letter from Birmingham Jail:

https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf)

He also shared a 4 step process in engaging in a campaign to bring about change through non violence:

1 collect the facts

This is an absolutely essential first step.

Nowadays people's sole source of information is from unreliable sources - the internet, social media, gossip, innuendo.

Collect the facts.

2 negotiation. The leaders of the civil rights movement in Birmingham Alabama met face to face with business leaders. They negotiated and were promised that racially offensive signs in businesses would be removed.

That promise was broken.

3 self purification

So as they readied themselves for direct action in the form of sit ins and marches, they entered a period of self purification.

Everyone who was going to act had to be prepared mentally, spiritually and emotionally to be absolutely certain they could act non violently.

That when others yelled or screamed, kicked or punched, they would not respond in kind.

4 direct action

Then and only then did they take direct action.

Action which resulted in the end of segregation in the South.

This is a reality check to bring about change.

And it is not just for non violent campaigns like the civil rights movement, but for all of us in our own lives.

Sometimes we bristle at being told what to do.

It can be hardest if it's a family member giving us orders.

Seems like even Jesus struggled with this.

Deeper meaning is that discipleship means we are students, followers of Jesus.

Are you ignoring God?

Refusing to obey?

Are you reluctant?

What so often gets in the way of doing what God asks of us
is pride.

I talked about this last week.

Pride tries to convince us that we don't need God.

That we should be in control, calling the shots, and doing whatever we want.

How to overcome this tendency?

From Wash Post article on 12/25:

"Through surges and respites, month after virus-rattled month, there has always been an expectation that this will end, that life will return to something familiar.

Maybe it won't be a restoration of what was.

Maybe it won't happen all at once.^[P]_[SEP]

But the hope has persisted, a hope that the isolation and the anxiety, the waiting and the watching, will subside and people will be able to look up one day and say,

"Hmm, this is sort of normal," or "This is different, but it's okay again."

^[P]_[SEP] This season, in another stretch of spiking concern, it can be hard to believe in those who say we're heading back to the way things used to be.

But people are increasingly insisting that they are going to live again,
to come out of hiding, to do the things they've put off and put aside."