

## Reality Check WEEK THREE January 23, 2022

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 to 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 align 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 of 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 these things 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. +