

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, we thank you for the simple gift that is this day and opportunity. We welcome the life-giving light of the sun to guide our way and the breeze to refresh us. We welcome the precipitation from above that, while sometimes inconvenient, brings goodness and health to the land. For all the gifts you give us, we return to you praise, devotion, and service. On this morning, we gather in your house to remember: remember who we are and what we are called to do in your name. We go from your house to live: live richly, empowered by your Holy Spirit, to be and make disciples for the benefit of the world. As we reside here, we pour ourselves out before you in faithfulness. Hear all that is in our hearts, those things we celebrate and those that burden us, and hear the petitions of the Body around the world as we grapple with issues of power and love.

We know, God, that worship of you is foolishness to the world but also dangerous to the world's love of power. The power of this world works against your purposes. The world thrives on love of power, whereas you empower us through the power of love. Holy God, we pray to follow the difficult way of Christ that lifts up the power of love. We remember there will always be Herods in this world who will lie, threaten, and steal to hold onto their strength, but our strength comes from something eternal. We trust in your true power as we pray in the name of the one who preaches true power, Jesus the Christ. Let us together pray as he taught against the grain of the world's ways...

## SERMON

Let's take a hypothetical situation. How about if I came right up to you and punched you in the cheek? What would you do? I'm sure you'd want to punch me right back. But we are serious about scripture, are we not? Aren't we taught to "turn the other cheek?"

Yes, we are, but there's something about that that seems so...weak. It makes it sound like you're cowering in the corner. I mean, wouldn't Jesus want you to defend yourself? In today's world, yes, to simply turn the other cheek is no way to live because it seems like you're being taken advantage of. But what if it's not just about the action of turning the other cheek and asking for another slap? What if Jesus Christ was saying something more about what it means to have true power instead of a simple telling of "don't hit back" on the playground? The way of Christ is transformation, redemption, and the revealing of what power really is when the world says to hit back. That is the power of the Gospel; that is the power in the story of Epiphany.

This last Wednesday we ended the traditional twelve days of Christmas and arrived at the important holiday of Epiphany. I don't know exactly where it came from, but there's a way to sum up the story of Epiphany in a quick, pithy phrase: "The world will know peace when the power of love is greater than the love of power." Epiphany is the beginning of peace. We have both of those parties at play here with the embodiment of love and true power in the newborn baby Jesus and the face of the love of power in King Herod. In the middle are who we usually call the Wise Men, the Magi, the visitors from the East and their mission to see the Christ Child. It's helpful to remember who these visitors were, as culture has wound them up into something they probably aren't. Contrary to opinion, they were not kings. They also were not Jewish, but they knew some of the scriptures. Scripture seems to indicate they were men, but I saw a sign that put things well. If they were wise women, they would have "asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stable, and made a casserole." But these were astrologers; they read the course of the stars. In a way, they are the middlemen, so to

speak, but their presence and their authentic search reveal the intentions of all the parties in this struggle. They have a choice: they pick between the love of power and the power of love, and they pick well. In other words, they have a dangerous, fearful mission, for it flies in the face of the world's powers-that-be. It usurps the governments and the structures that seem all-too-comfortable, for a new Ruler has come. His law is love and his Gospel is peace.

As the Gospel of Matthew tells us, these Magi begin their trip in the land by visiting the ruler of the region, King Herod, as a sign of good faith. They tell him their mission: they wish to visit the newborn King of the Jews and to worship him. As the New Interpreter's Commentary indicates, these are threatening actions. They are proclaiming a different kind of power, and it's not Herod's. Once he hears this and the way they talk about it, Herod's response is telling. He scrambles to find the answer of what is happening. He finds it threatening. Not only is he afraid, he schemes to make sure that he can get a piece of the action...and by "piece of the action," I mean he's out to kill this threat to his power. After all, to hear those scriptures and to know that God is acting in a new way, a new way that can easily disrupt his power and take away all that he values. He has the value system of the greater world: love of power, and love of power has no room for sharing. So he sends them forth in the right direction and asks them to come back so he can "pay homage" to the newborn Christ child. They visit the child, giving him gifts for a King, and God warns them to go home a different way. King Herod realizes later that the Magi leave him in the dust; he plots his revenge that will take a toll on many children. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The power of love vs. the love of power. It's empowerment vs. power hoarding. Jesus is the former, and Herod is the latter. The first tries to lift up those around them. It recognizes that power is given, is offered for it to be real, never taken. The second tries to push everyone down by forcing everyone to be subject to one. The saying is, after all, that you can tell a lot about someone in how he or she treats their inferiors in any kind of leadership situation. So, what kind of bosses have you had? I remember the first boss that I ever had. Her name was Karen, and not only was she flexible, but she cared about me as a person. She cared about my interests and my well-being. I'm grateful to her for my first job opportunity. And, well, I don't think I've ever had a bad boss in my lifetime, but I've seen them at work. They care more about their bottom lines than their employees. They work for their own benefit and their own desires, making everyone around them expendable for their own gain.

In today's world, some are more benevolent than others; some are downright hostile attempts at being powerful. I'm sure you, like me, were horrified to hear of a hydrogen bomb detonation in North Korea this past week. It's fearful, and, indeed, it was meant to scare us because there is a leader who lusts for power. His version of power is pushing others down to lift himself up. That is the extreme. On the other hand, there are more simple examples. I am afraid of the new year of 2016, and I can sum it up in two words: political ads. They invade every waking moment of the stuff you really want to see with biting commentary on whichever opponent is a hypocrite, scumbag, and fifteen other reasons why you'd be better off voting for Darth Vader than this candidate's challenger. Sure, we, in a democracy, elect our leaders, but the process in which that happens shows a lot of love of power. Yeah, yeah, we get it: every other political opponent is absolutely evil.

They wallow in the mud, flinging it at one another, then come out sparkling clean and in office or a loser and disgraced. Does this mean we don't vote? Of course not, but, underneath the surface, below the commentary, it demonstrates what the power in this world looks like. You have to push down your opponent in order to get on top. Those we elect to put their constituency ahead of their own desires show the exact opposite during the election process. And the deep problem with this is that, well, it works. It works! We expect this to happen, and so it goes on as usual. If we decided that negative political ads were the wrong way to go, if we made the candidates pay for the negativity they spew, they would go away immediately. But we buy into that stuff, and so, they keep making it. It's a vicious circle. It is the love of power in action simply by the way the system is set up: to bring down everyone else. But, as we know there is an alternative.

Well, I can tell you this, the Jesus Christ of the scriptures would not run for office using these tactics and seeking that power. That is not where his true power lies. It lies in something more important than votes or office. It lies in the truth of who we are and what we are called to do, empowering us to do it. His power is based not in self-serving but lifting up and exposing the true intentions of the world's powers. Earlier, I spoke of "turning the other cheek" and the dilemma it seems to put us in. It's a hard passage, no question. Later in Matthew, after the story of Epiphany, Jesus teaches his disciples, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." To our ears, that sounds like wimping out. Take the abuse, it seems. And, let's be honest, this scripture has been used to justify various kinds of abuse throughout history. It's been used to justify the abuser and make the victim stay victims. But that's not the life-giving Gospel of Jesus or what he advocates. If nothing else, the issues we have with this passage show that we need to

always look deeper at scripture because it always will surprise us. Jesus is advocating something different than taking a beating; Jesus is saying that we hold the power to expose evil behavior for what it is. Here's the secret, thanks to Walter Wink's *The Powers that Be*. When you turn the other cheek after getting slapped, you force the one who slaps to use the back of his hand. That, in the mentality of the ancient Near East, was unclean. Essentially, you expose the one who slaps as unclean, making him the problem, and you retain your dignity and pride. You make the abuser show that they are in the wrong. It's not taking a beating; it's using the hitters actions to expose the violations for what they are. This is the power of love in action, for it provides the victim vindication and the violator possibility to see the error of his ways and transformation available. Christ, after all, is in the business of changing minds to that which is most important, that lasts beyond the momentary grabs for power.

Epiphany is the beginning of something great, the beginning of a new story. The Christ was first announced to the seemingly "unimportant" people of the world in shepherds; now the powers-that-be begin to take notice, and the power of the Gospel gets underway. That Gospel preaches the power of love in the world where the love of power often reigns. You can see it in the small ways that a boss might treat you; you can see the scourge of the lust for power in our world's leaders. In this year, when we will see that in full effect when power gets transferred in our country, keep your eyes on the one who truly is in power and what that power means. It means love for the neighbor; it means that transformation is always possible, and goodness always around the corner. Thanks be to God for the fearful mission of the Magi, not for us, but for the powers who realize what they fight for are truly bankrupt. Amen and Amen!