

Today's Super Bowl sermon.
5 Epiphany 2021

We need not look up to find God; we need only to look around:
within ourselves, beyond ourselves, into the eyes of another. Amen

As I read our selection from 1st Corinthians last week, my mind drifted back to 1982 which, if you think about it, is nothing strange for me as my mind drifts a lot. Anyway, I know that I shared with you that I experienced a Cursillo weekend, back in 1982, at St. Stephen's Seminary on the Island of Oahu. Cursillo is a three-day short course in Christianity. It is run by Lay people with one or two clergy present as spiritual advisors.

I had absolutely no idea what this was going to be like or what would happen over the next few years. I was so affected by that weekend, that I volunteered to work in the kitchen on as many times as I could. I very much enjoyed serving with the kitchen crew and serving the men that came for their weekends. One of the benefits for me was to get to know folks from all over the Island and the food was fantastic.

I was eventually asked to be on the team as a presenter. At 29 yo and very shy, being a speaker was not something I was comfortable with at all. It caused me a lot of anxiety. If I can avoid public speaking, I do. When I must, Part of what I still do today, is to prepare and prepare and prepare. It is one thing to be worried about knowing one's topic and another to appear that one knows the topic. The three days are filled with talks and group discussions with emphasis on the doctrine of Grace, the Sacraments, and the great Cursillo tripod: Piety, Study, and Action. Plus, there is fellowship, singing, good food, and time for privacy, meditation, prayer, and walks. Eucharist is celebrated each day.

For my first Cursillo weekend as a presenter, we each had to present our talk before the team for critiquing. That would be like giving your sermon to a group of clergy before Sunday morning. Might be a good idea but I get nervous enough having Jan critique it the night before as it is.

I cannot remember what my topic was that I assigned to give, but I very much remember the critique. They were not mean at all, believe me, but the comments they made were definitely unexpected.

I was told that I was too formal and that folks would take offense because I was talking above them. They would not be able to relate to what I was saying. I was not sure how to fix that. Apparently, it was not so much what I said, but how I said it. I did not really understand but I tried.

It has only been recently that I think I know what they were saying. I was a Haole which meant that I was white and not Native Hawaiian, Pilipino, Japanese, or of Portuguese descent as most of the attendees were. It would not matter what I said if it was perceived as coming from someone coming off as superior to them. Even though that was as far from the truth as it could have possibly been. I deeply respected the entire team and leaned on them for guidance on what I should do. I know now that I didn't get it then. Maybe I still don't. Either way, they kept inviting me to be on other teams and to give different talks. I still miss them to this day.

Often Paul often comes across to many of us from a level of superiority. At least he does to me. He was very educated, especially in Jewish Law and Scripture. Yet, he felt that he was required to preach Jesus Christ to all that he encountered.

As he writes this morning: "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. 22To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings".

By no means, do I read these words and fully understand what Paul was saying. He knew how to reach his audience in a way that they could understand. But he did not change his message. Because of his personal history and expertise, He was able to reach out to a variety of different social groups to preach the Gospel. He felt that it was his duty and privilege to do so.

Despite saying that he I had become all things to all people, so that he might by any means save some, to try and be all things to all people is not realistic for any of us.

For one thing, it is almost impossible for anyone to do, and for a congregation is not going to happen. Trying to do this will lead to exhaustion and quickly use up available resources. Yet, we must share the Gospel to others. As we have heard numerous times in congregational development, we need to find ways to reach out to others within the local community by finding what the needs are in those communities. Outreach is vital for any chance of growth. So, congregations must be strategic in their outreach, and try to do a few things well. Even a small congregation can offer community programs with a generous and accommodating spirit. Every church is challenged to offer at least one outreach program that will provide lasting value to the community around it. But in order to do that, you must know what the community needs. Some congregations create English as a second language classes to help immigrants become fluent in English and integrated into the community of faith.

At Vienna Presbyterian Church in Virginia, a "Friendship Class" includes the intellectually disabled and mentally challenged. Created for a handful of children with Down syndrome, the class has grown to include 28 students with a variety of disabilities. The format always includes the sharing of news, a Bible study based on the Sunday sermon and a closing prayer. Students bring their friends and do their own outreach to the community by participating in walks to fight world hunger. Is there worth to be found in a class for the intellectually disabled? Absolutely.

In the battle against hunger, some churches dig community gardens on church grounds. This provides opportunities for church members and neighbors to work the soil together

and grow food for the needy. In South Lansing, St. Michaels Episcopal Church has continued to increase their community garden to serve the neighboring community. City of Refuge Ministries here in Adrian has a growing Food Pantry that serves Lenawee County at least twice a month. Jan and I try to help with those deliveries as members of our congregation. I realize that Paul was not talking about simply providing supplies and services to those in need. I want to think that Paul assessed those to whom he was speaking and writing, noting their language, their culture, and the cultures within which they were living. His message did not change but he was able to share the Good news of Christ in a way that would be understood. When you can do that, communities grow and flourish.

I have said for several months that my biggest fear is that we will go back to the way things were before the pandemic. In my opinion, that would be the worst possible outcome for the church. I also believe that for society, as a whole, but that belief will be challenged by many. For us as Christians, we cannot meet people where they are at and treat them with dignity and respect; root out injustice and level the playing field, and genuinely love them, if we try and go back to the way things were.

Jesus and Paul did not advocate for the people to go back to the way things were. Jesus came with a new way of Love and Paul preached the message to everyone he encountered. He taught others to carry on and teach the way of Jesus. We can do this my sisters and brothers. Start with the Love of God and everything else will fall into place.