

**February 2, 2020 – From Emergency Help to Sustained Care**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

I feel warmth and tenderness in my heart when I learn of couples that have been together and loved each other for long periods of time. It’s an honor to come across people who have been able to celebrate forty, fifty and even sixty years of marriage to the same person. There are many factors that contribute to reaching those high anniversary numbers. One basic requirement is for both people to live a long life, obviously. But during that long life together, one may observe a strong desire and commitment to faithful love pursued, wrestled with and even affirmed through life struggles. This supports and confirms my hope in committed marital love. It is equally true that a married couple is constantly challenged to find and maintain a balance between the pursuit of individual affirmation and couple togetherness. Friction and conflict often arise around the hunger to create space and time for self-care and self-expression on one side, and the attraction to the spouse expressed through care and celebration of life together even in small acts of kindness. Egoistic habits, unpredictable job schedules, child-rearing disagreements, economic pressure, and societal instability further compound the challenges. Often we work hard to prepare the wedding day as if that was the culmination of life together, forgetting that that is only the beginning. The initial infatuation and the honeymoon period give us the illusion that we are strong enough to face whatever challenge comes our way. But life sooner or later teaches us that we can take nothing for granted. A good marriage needs constant care or the couple will drift apart. That is when we need to ask a few basic and hard questions that will help us not only for marital life but for life in general: “Who am I?” “What do I want?” and “How do I get there?” As we wrestle with those questions, a few other questions bubble up: “What’s the meaning of all this?” “What kind of imprint do I leave behind?” “How do I express my voice in a way that is true, honorable, respectful and constructive?”

There is no doubt that we are capable of the most heroic and self-denying actions for the benefit of those around us who struggle with danger, illness, loss, natural disasters, prejudice and so on. When we see acts of courage and care, our sense of hope for the world is renewed. We are pretty good at hauling strangers out of a raging flood, at rescuing those buried under rubble after an earthquake, at giving blood, food, and shelter. Those are all good Samaritan actions we don’t think twice about doing in emergency situations. The challenge is to move from immediate heroism to systemic care, from intense compassion to sustained empathy, from emergency fix to planned long-term solutions. We may want to consider moving beyond being mesmerized by heroic actions to trusting the inner God-given power of the Spirit of Christ in us for the care of the world. After all we are entrusted with God’s creation, we are our brother’s and sister’s keeper. A sustained and disciplined life of prayer will get us to the point of proclaiming with the apostle Paul, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)

This season of the church year is called Epiphany, where we highlight the ways Jesus is shown forth to the world. In the gospel of Matthew, soon after his baptism in the River Jordan, where his identity and mission are declared, the Son of the living God is led into the wilderness. There, assailed by temptations, he affirms his resolution to worship only God and therefore to be true to his identity. He has found his voice and is determined to fulfill his mission: he is not going to be distracted or deterred from following the inner voice of the Spirit. In his faithfulness, Jesus heals people’s infirmities and denounces all impediments to a dignified life. His teaching emphasizes what life under the rule of God looks like and declares God’s blessing to all who trust and remain true to their inner goodness even amidst the road bumps of life. Jesus points us towards the light that shines even in the darkness. He reminds us that we are that light, and our light is intended for the world. He challenges us to see the moments of mercy, grace, and peace as glimpses of the kingdom of heaven even amid the struggles of earth.

But blessings of mercy and peace don’t come to us in a transactional manner. We set ourselves up for failure when we think we need to follow a strict moral code, so we don’t get punished, in this life or the next. According to this logic, if we do good, then God is good to us, and if we do evil, God punishes us. To think like this about our relationship with God turns obedience into a never-ending struggle to manipulate God into crowning us with glory in the afterlife. Obviously, this kind of reasoning turns out to be a double-edged sword as life teaches us that we will fail miserably, and punishment becomes our ever-present ghost of the future.

This kind of give and take reasoning is pure idolatry, the worship of a false god who cannot satisfy. This way of life has consequently caused many a Christian to feel spiritually stressed, disappointed, and burned out. A fear-based spiritual life needs frequent jumpstarts and leaves one joyless, insecure and terrified until the end. It is not infrequent that many people abandon it altogether in search of freedom from a strict, demanding, and unsatisfiable God. My hope is that people may come closer to the God of Jesus instead of giving up on God and look for satisfaction in the empty promises of the world.

Jesus tells us that by simply, humbly, and vulnerably paying attention to and embracing the daily unfolding of life in all its challenges, even the ugliest ones, without running away from them, making excuses for ourselves, or blaming others for our suffering is the way to experience happiness. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus offers a word of hope and guidance to those who suffer: those who mourn, who lack power, who are not aggressive, who are kind and are persecuted for it. We all can reach deep inside and nurture attitudes of peace, meekness, purity of heart, love of justice, courage, steadiness, and perseverance in the face of persecution. Those attitudes pave the way to the joy of the kingdom, and reveal trust in the ever-present loving providence of God.

The prophet Micah reminds us that God is not interested in our sacrifices. Life has enough challenges as it is; we do not need to manufacture extra ones for the purpose of pleasing God and to obtain God’s favor. All that is required is faithfulness to the truth implanted in us by God, the image of God given to us at the time of creation. In Micah, God laments that those in power “tear the skin from my people.” They “break their bones to pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle.” They “cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing in their mouths” (3:2–5). At the time of Micah’s prophetic words on behalf of Yahweh, disaster befalls the people of Israel, with the Assyrian invasion in the north and the Babylonian sacking of the south. To the ravaged remnant, Micah predicts restoration (ch. 4) and, in today’s reading, a path of how to get there: “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” This requires alertness and discipline. It does not come automatically: we need to train in the ways of the Lord (Isaiah 2:3; Deuteronomy 30:16)

Thus we pray: God of light, this Epiphany season, we pray that you will show us the light of your love, no matter what darkness surrounds us. Draw us closer to you through your Son, who gave himself for our sake, so that we would know the riches of heaven here on earth. Amen.