Feb. 22 & 23, 2020 All Saints Parish, Syracuse 7th Sunday of Ordinary Time Fr. Fred Daley

Let us Reclaim Jesus

There is a true story about an old cathedral in Europe, where for centuries people coming in the side door would faithfully bow to a large white-washed wall… a tradition passed down from grandparents to parents to children.

Often small children would ask: “Why do we bow to the wall?” and they would be told “That’s what you are supposed to do in church.” Nobody really questioned it — it was tradition plain and simple.

One spring there was some heavy rains which caused severe water damage to the walls of the church. As the village mason was repairing the large white-washed wall, lo and behold: he discovered that underneath the many layers of white-wash there was a beautiful, stunning, precious painting of the crucified Jesus on the cross; a painting that covered a major section of the white-washed wall. At once: the original purpose behind the solemn bow as one entered the side entrance of the Cathedral became clear to all!

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Sisters and brothers, this true story in many ways can be used as a metaphor for the state of the church — the state of Christianity. Our Gospel today can be a tiny example. Jesus’ teaching on love of enemy is part of his Sermon on the Mount, Chapters 5, 6 & 7 of Matthew: Jesus’ ‘Mission Statement,’ Jesus’ ‘Inaugural Address,’ his core teachings: his announcement of the birth of the Reign of God, the Realm of God on earth as in heaven; the world God intended; the Kindom of God: a world where every person without exception — as pointed out in our second reading from St. Paul to the Corinthians — is a *Temple of God,* to be treated with respect and dignity; created in God’s image and likeness! We are *all children of God*: sisters and brothers; …when I dehumanize or hurt or kill another – I dehumanize, hurt or kill a child of God – a brother or sister, *and that applies even to our enemies!*

Sisters and brothers, if we are honest, this vision of Jesus for the restoration of the world, by and large (with some wonderful exceptions) is buried under many layers of white-wash. Just focusing on our Nation: there are more Christian churches in every city than there are gas stations or supermarkets or schools; all heavy on ritual and tradition. Yet Christians have killed more Christians and others than any other religion in the history of the world. Research shows clearly that terrorism ends through political settlements and accountable, effective policy which get to the roots of the injustice that births hatred — yet in our predominantly Christian nation we, in 2020, have a military budget of $738 billion, funding the purchase of hundreds of fighter-bombers and militarized drones, more than a dozen new naval ships and it goes on and on… all subsidizing the entire military-industrial complex.

What I’m getting at, as the German theologian Heidegger often said, is*: the problem with Christianity is not that it doesn’t work; the problem is that it never really has been tried*! The true mission of Jesus – that he was ultimately crucified for – continues by and large to be covered in white-wash.

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On Wednesday we begin the 40 day journey of Lent with the distribution of ashes.

In the early church, Lent was a time for those preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil to spend some time in prayer and fasting and works of charity – mirroring Jesus is 40 day retreat in the desert preparing for his public ministry. Gradually it became a time for the whole Christian Community of the Baptized to do a little spring-cleaning of the heart in preparation for Easter.

Sisters and brothers, we approach this Lent as a Nation that is in deep crisis. Many of us ask ourselves *what can we do* as this political crisis gets worse and worse every day. We are experiencing a dangerous rise of racialized nationalism and authoritarian rule which provokes America’s worst instincts and demons — opposed to what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our Nation.” No matter what our political preferences, we must admit that the policy goals of the current administration have contributed to ever deepening divisions and growing vulnerability among them marginalized sectors of our population including the dehumanizing treatment of migrants, injustice and abuse in the criminal justice system, blatant sexism, systematic attempts to restrict rights from LGBTQ+ persons, increased destruction of our environment, the marginalization and assault on communities of color, especially through voter suppression and economic policies that have contributed to the largest disparity of wealth in the nation’s history, all rooted in America’s original sins: demonizing ideologies and systematic inequality.

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*What can we do?* As American Disciples of Jesus, we might first of all dig through the many layers of white-wash to discover and rediscover what Jesus would do: what are the core teachings of Jesus that will shed light on what we must do?

And: we must never forget: One of the 20th century’s scandals that scar Christianity was the frightening silence of Christian leaders and people during the reign of Hitler. One powerful exception was the Nazi resistor, prophet, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer – who was killed because of his powerful message to the Christian church:

*“How crucial it is for the church to find our voice and respond to the threats to human life, integrity and community when they first appear and to continue to challenge them.”*

His prophetic voice, by and large, went unheeded. To date the silence of many of our Catholic and other religious leaders across the nation is frightening. I get a Catholic newspaper from another Diocese and in the latest issue there appeared not a word about what’s happening in the Nation’s politics – except a small article from Catholic News Service: “Bishops applaud administrations work for school choice.” [Now, school choice might be great… but given today’s context – talk about rearranging chairs on the Titanic!]

Sisters and brothers, there is much more than just another election coming up. What is at stake is a test of democracy and a test faith; the future of the Nation and the future of the Church. The Church is in danger of losing the next generation if we don’t address crucial issues like racism, sexism, xenophobia, climate change, economic inequality, institutional corruption and abuse. We already see the many young people turning away from religion in disgust.

As you know, here at All Saints during the Lenten and Easter Season, we are going to reflect on what Jesus would do by reclaiming his core teachings and how they connect with what’s going on in our Country at this moment, through our book study groups (already some 90 parishioners have signed-up!) and our weekend homilies, using Jim Wallace’s book Christ in Crisis. On Pentecost Sunday we, as a Parish, will recommit ourselves to these core values of Jesus — reclaiming Jesus by digging through the layers of white-wash that hide the truth of our faith. We’re in for quite an adventure! Let us pray for one another; let us pray for our Church; let us pray for our Nation as we begin this Lenten journey.

Reflecting on Lent, the late Father Joe Dondes writes: *“However high the ashes of sins and mistakes piled on a person’s life* (… or the Church’s life)*, Jesus always discovers under the ashes* (… or under the white-wash) *the original fire put there by God. Jesus not only sees the fire, but remains faithful to it by blowing Spirit into it.”*

Amen