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**Epiphany B – January 7, 2024**

**“Kneeling and Redirection”**

**Read: Matthew 2: 1 - 12, Memorize: Matthew 2: 12**

Three wise men come from the east bringing gifts to the baby Jesus, and in the process receive a gift worth the distance and effort they spent. After depositing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, they in turn, are redirected to their home, bypassing Herod. Just as the Wise Men were redirected, we, who come to Jesus today, also find our lives redirected.

**Our joy and fulfillment in life will not be about finding our own happiness, but in intentionally seeking the way of service, sacrifice and surrender.** The new direction means finding the holy in the least expected places, the very places we often avoid when we speak of happiness.

Our society is hooked on avoiding pain. Just watch the commercials on TV, radio or in magazines. We have been misled into thinking that the way we find joy is to escape pain. Unfortunately, all of our efforts to do so fail. That is why it is important that we learn from the wise men who learned directly from Jesus what is the true path of life. **Jesus redirects us to follow His path by inviting us to face pain head-on rather than seeking to avoid it.**

Remember when Peter makes that great confession that Jesus is the Christ of God? What was his response when Jesus tells him that He’s going up to Jerusalem to die? Peter takes Jesus aside and “rebukes” Him, which is a very strong biblical word.

When he does this Jesus turns to Peter and says to him in essence, “Your refusal to face pain in the work I have come to do is, at its core, evil.” Having rebuked Peter for his lack of faith, Luke tells us that Jesus faced Jerusalem and started His journey towards the inevitable pain of His life.

**Jesus helps us understand that our joy in life will not be in escaping pain and evil, but in facing it with Him.** You might remember that it was Peter who was protesting the storm on the sea. When we read the words of Jesus, “Peace, be still,” we often think

**Jesus is only talking to the stormy waters. Could He perhaps, be speaking to Peter also?**

**We so often pray that God will take us out of the storm because we are uncomfortable and we don't like it. But the truth of the matter is, God does not take us away from the inevitable storms of life. God has never promised to take us away from any of life's storms or pain, but to walk through them with us.**

**When we make friends with that fact that to live is to know pain and that it is better faced than escaped, we can see more clearly God's presence because we can be sure He is with us. We come to see that the common thread that knits us all together into the human family is the experience of pain.**

**We might think it will be joy that unites us but joys are so varied and people are joyous for so many different reasons. We are not united by color, or language or belief. What we share in common, every last one of us, are those things that grieve us.**

**Think about grief in this way. Carlis Marley said, "All our grief comes from one thing: something ends before we were ready for it to end." When dealing with people who are grieving, whatever the reason, the common thread is their desire that that relationship might have continued.**

**Garrison Keiller told the story of a time that his mother and father took him to the city to visit an aunt who was lonely and alone after the death of her husband of fifty-five years. He described how she looked to him at ten years of age. Her dress was stained with food spots, her rouge was heavy on one side, her lipstick was crooked, her fake pearls did not go with her dress. She sat at the table as they ate together.**

**As she sat there, she began to cry. Then she began to bemoan her situation, "I have nothing left to live for. I might as well die." And she started to cry as she kept chewing her food. "I'll bet that if I died tomorrow, no one would even come to my funeral, not even you folks."**

**Garrison, seeking to be as helpful as any ten-year-old can be, who has no real understanding of death said to her, "Oh, I'd come. I'd be glad to come to your funeral." Reflecting on her outburst, Keiller reflects as he thinks back forty years: "Every tear that poor woman cried, we will cry before we leave this world and give it to the one death we owe."**

**In our Gospel for today we are at the beginning of Jesus' life, but even in that we are challenged to face the pain rather than run away from it. Think how Mary and Joseph must have felt as Simeon tells them that their Son is going to face great difficulty and a sword will pierce them. Even at this young age, Jesus reminds us that we cannot escape pain.**

**On this weekend of Epiphany, which celebrates the light of Christ being spread into the world, it is a good time for us to make friends with the small victories that will be ours, rather than continue the myth that there are big deals that we must negotiate. We might want to take a lesson from Mother Teresa. She teaches us that there are three things that will help us.**

**The first has to do with the time she came to a bishop and asked that he allow her to create an order to lead that would take care of dying people on the streets. He asked her how much money she had. She pulled out two cents. He said that she could not build an order on two cents. She replied, "With God and two cents, you can do anything." She won a small victory of gaining permission in order to paint her vision of much love for a dying world.**

**The second thing has to do with what Mother Teresa said after she won the Nobel Peace Prize. She announced to the world: "There are no big deals anymore. Only small things to be done with great love."**

**And the third thing that Mother Teresa said that helps us in downward mobility in order to serve the Christ was this: "Don't think that by your little acts of kindness that you are going to change the world. And it is so important that you do them!"**

**When Jesus asked us to let our light shine before all people, I'm pretty sure He did not have a lighthouse in mind. Perhaps Jesus' vision is that we see every day acts of kindness done in His name, most of which are given anonymously, as part of our service to Him.**

**A pastor who lived in San Diego was most impressed by the stories of two women who knew the meaning of small victories. Both lived in poor communities and wanted to make a contribution but didn't know what to do. The first lady had a vision of helping the kids in the neighborhood. She said the vision that came to her was God instructing her to back her car out of the garage.**

Next, she decided that the open room in the garage could be made into a place to teach and nurture the neighborhood children. She invited them in, talked with them about God and self-esteem and nurtured their reading and writing abilities. Many years later, those young people came back, after leading successful lives, and proclaimed that the difference was in this wonderful woman who backed her car out of the garage and gave her love to kids who needed it.

The other woman, not far away, wanted to feed the homeless in the neighborhood and could not get a permit from the city. Watching the people needing food daily, she decided to go the way of the Nike slogan and “Just do it!” The city said she could not feed people out of the front of the house, so she set up benches in the backyard and fed 150 people a day. When the city called, she said she was not breaking the law: “These people are not homeless people or clients; they are my family. I always feed my family in the backyard.” Left with no choice, the city left her alone. She knew the different way of Jesus, the way of small victories done in His name.

The way of Jesus is longer and harder than we often anticipated. Because it contains pain, we are often tempted not to choose it. Yet, at the end of the journey, we discover that the redirected way of life that Jesus calls us to is, in fact, the blessing because it helps us identify with Him.

To walk the way of Jesus is to kneel before the Holy One with empty hands, not with the words, “give me,” but the humble prayer that begins, “make me.” At that moment, Jesus sets us on paths we would never have chosen. Yet, at the end of life, we discover His redirected paths are the ones that we would have chosen in the first place, because they are His paths.

How could we have missed the fact that the way of Jesus would include pain? Knowing that, helps us to face it, trusting that Jesus will walk with us through that pain. By that trusting faith we are blessed and become a blessing as we share Jesus’ Good News that not even pain or storms can separate us from Him.

Count me in: Understanding that the way of Jesus involves pain, what will you do to face it rather than avoid it?