

## A Safe Space For All

John 1:1-18

30 December 2018

We have just heard one of the most beautiful, majestic and profound passages in all of Holy Scripture, and possibly in all of literature. Just about everything you need to know about the gospel of Jesus Christ is here. Many scholars say these 18 verses are a song of the early church. Imagine a small community of Christians in Ephesus, gathering in someone's home to sing their song of faith:

*In the beginning was the Word. The light shines in the darkness. The Word became flesh. No one has ever seen God, but the Lord Jesus Christ has made him known to us.*

There is a powerful and astounding truth in these verses, as well as a challenge. Through Jesus Christ, God came down to our level and in this Incarnation asked us to make his house a safe place for all people.

There is another biblical song that complements the one given to us by John's community. You can find it in the second chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. Again, imagine a small community, maybe a dozen people, meeting in that Greek city and singing of Christ Jesus who emptied himself and became human, became obedient, even submitting himself to the pain and humiliation of the cross, and all to the glory of God the Father.

Those early Christians sang of God's mighty acts, just as we do. And like them, we are called to ask what does this all mean? What is God's desire for us?

Well, for one, God wants to be in relationship with us. The Creator yearns for His creation. Just as scripture says there in the Book of Genesis where, in the cool of the day, we find God calling out to Adam: "Where are you?"

We hear an echo of this in the Song of Solomon when the lover awakens, alone in her bed, and says: I will rise and go about the city and seek him whom my soul loves because we are in a relationship. We are bound to one another.

Now, we all know that Immanuel, another name for Jesus, means "God with us." But there is another aspect to this idea of God coming to be with us, and that is that through Jesus Christ, God meets us on our level in all our messy humanity. He became as we are in hopes that by this witness we would be transformed to become as he is.

A classic rule of leadership is at work here: Meet your people where they are. This is what today's gospel is telling us. The Word became flesh and came to us in great vulnerability and humility.

This idea of humility is one that all of us, including priests, struggle to put in our lives. When I came out of seminary 11 years ago, I'll admit I was a little puffed up. I was full of theology and Church history, family systems theory and High Church liturgy. I'd spent the previous three years hanging out with the architects of the 1982 Hymnal and the Lift Every Voice and Sing Hymnal, and I had *cum laude* written on my diploma in fancy script. I was ready for the parish.

My first Sunday behind the altar I opened my mouth and started singing: "The Lord be with you." Folks looked at me like I'd just dropped down from Mars. There were plenty more missteps and misunderstandings. They weren't getting me and I wasn't getting them. I complained to one of my mentors.

"You have to meet your people where they are," he said.

Had I been a little wiser and little less self-impressed, I might have listened. But I didn't. I forged ahead, chanting and quoting Paul Tillich, and digging myself a deeper hole. So, I took my problem to a higher authority, my mom. She heard me out, then said: "Well, you have to meet your people where they are."

What! Meet them where they are? Why can't they meet me where I am?

Well, as it turns out, that's not how ministry works. John's gospel says: "The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us." He didn't say the Word became flesh and lorded his divinity over us. No. He dwelt among us. Scripture tells us that after one particularly trying day, Jesus told his disciples that the ways of the world were not for them. "Instead," he said, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all."

I'm still working on fully digesting that elusive, counter-cultural piece of gospel. Yet, there it is. God has met us where we are. But to what end? Surely, for salvation, to be in service to one another, and to create a safe space, a kingdom if you will, where God's children can be at peace. For we are his children, born not of blood, or the will of the flesh, or the will of man, but born through faith in Jesus Christ.

And yet, this idea of creating a safe space often slips through our hands. The ways of the world come crashing into the sanctuary and suddenly those who sought comfort, those who thought they saw the cross shining a light into their darkness, find themselves ill at ease, or, worse, rejected and driven out.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) exists because our churches have not been safe spaces. Oh, I'm sure there was plenty good preaching and good worship going on in those places, but they were not houses of prayer for all people as the prophet Isaiah demanded and as Jesus in the Gospel of Mark declared they should be. The same holds true for the Metropolitan Community Church. It exists because many of our gay brothers and sisters would come into church and not feel safe, or welcomed, or loved.

This idea of safety isn't limited to race or sexual orientation. You could be a mother with an afflicted child who is hard to control, or someone of few means among the well-to-do, or vice-versa. The main point is that we all want, we all need, a safe space. And it doesn't have to be a place where everyone thinks as we do, or looks like we do. But it has to be a place where we can be at ease and not endure the discomforting stares and behind-the-back whispers of those who regard our presence as an intrusion that will hopefully and quickly pass.

Ensuring that our churches are safe spaces remains one of our greatest challenges and has the potential of being our greatest witness to the world. Even now, some of us here are excited by the possibility of working together in ministry with St. Philip's. But there may also come a time when St. Anne's will have to atone for those days when our beloved church was not a safe space.

That we still struggle with these issues is no cause for alarm. The ancient church in Galatia had the same problems. They had to be reminded that because they had clothed themselves with Christ, they were

now one, and not only one in the sense of a unified community of purpose, but also that they were the body of Christ in the world.

The wonderful gift and demanding challenge of today's gospel is this: Through Jesus Christ, God has met us where we are. And, He has given us the good work of making our churches outposts of that blessed kingdom where the divisions of the world do not hold sway because these sanctuaries, these places of refuge, including where we now gather on Church Circle, are safe spaces where you can breathe free, knowing you are in a house of prayer for all people, a house that exists for one reason alone – for the glory of God.

John's gospel tells us that in him was life and this life was the light of all, and this light shines in the darkness, never to be overtaken or extinguished. And Jesus tells us to take that light and let it shine before all through the good works of ministry and reconciliation and creating safe spaces so that the world can see and be amazed and give glory not to me, or to you, or to our church, but to our Father in heaven and to His son, who became one of us and gave himself for us so that we might truly and fully live.

Amen.

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