

February 20, 2022
The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Pastor Matt Duerr

The Darkest Place on Earth

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. Last week we finished up a three-segment phase of our sermon series for Epiphany on humility. We saw the need for humble leadership in the family, starting with dads. We saw the need for humble leadership in the church starting with the elders, the pastor, the deacons, the trustees, the board members. And last week we saw the need for humility within the church, or the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, each one individually, members of the entire body; we are to mimic our God. A God who Himself is humble and totally unified. The Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, the Spirit points us back to the Father. All working together, coequal, unified, not an ounce of pride but total humility.

But the minute we get to that, and we start talking about humble action within the church, it brings up that concept of works and could lead to a bad teaching called works righteousness. And if someone believes that they get to heaven not because of the work of Jesus, but because of their works, it's a scary road when you walk down that in the Bible. Because the question then arises, 'well what does God require of us?' And the Bible is very clear what He requires of us. Let's just start in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus, Himself the Son of God is speaking, saying "you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Well, we lose on that one, don't we? But we move on to chapter 22 and we read that we are to 'love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength; and love our neighbors as ourselves.' We blow it on that one too, don't we? And then we get, at the very end of Matthew, Matthew 28:19- 20: that we have a job—"to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe everything that Jesus has commanded us." We fail at that!

And you might say, ‘well Paster Matt, let's just go away from the gospels for right now. And let's just go back to the good ole Old Testament, where they had the law, and they lived under the law. What did God want?’ Well interestingly, the prophet Micah deals exactly with that in Micah chapter 6:8 where he writes, “What does God require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Do justice, we hear a lot about that word today. What does it mean in the Bible? It's one of the shortest definitions you can find. Justice means to be fair and honest. That's justice. What about this loving-kindness? It's interesting, the word that is used there. It literally means loyal and steadfast to kindness. It's a word of love that refers to marriage, that the spouse is loyal and steadfast to his or her spouse for all their life. And so, it's saying you are loyal and steadfast to kindness. You are this is way up there, it's your top priority to be kind. And then to walk humbly with your God? It's modest; a modest reverential life, always conscious that we are dependent on God. Because by ourselves we're in trouble. And if you think about that, if you are humbly walking with God in this modest reverential way, always conscious of your indebtedness to God way; that leads you to be just, to do what is fair, what is honest, and it leads you to lovingkindness; to be loyal and steadfast to being kind to people.

That starts with humility and it's also why James, the brother of Jesus, in James chapter 4 writes: “humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you or lift you up.” Because we are lost in our sin, and we need to be lifted up. But He lifts us up for a purpose, and what is it? “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all to the glory of God.” First Corinthians 10:31. We do it to the glory of God, and not to self.

And that is an unbelievably high call. Why? Well because if we do this, well we are then living out what Christ has called us to do. He tells us in our gospel, “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father, who is in heaven.” So, think about what that's saying. When God looks at us, what does He see? He sees exactly what His Son saw. And what did His Son say? “You are

the light of the world.” You might say hold on Pastor Matt, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” He's the light of the world, not me!

Jesus said, “you were the light of the world,” and Paul explains this to us in first Corinthians 5:20, when he says that we are “ambassadors for Christ.” An ambassador is a stand in, a person who is there in place of another individual, who can't be there. Now Jesus can always be there because He's God. But He calls us to be ambassadors and to be there for Him, with Him and be that physical example for others. And so be the light, His light! It's why He said, ‘you don't have a light and put a box over it. No, you put it up on a pole, so it lights the whole room. Why do you light the whole room? So you don't stub your toe.

But there's more to it because when Jesus speaks about this, He's using parable language, a physical message with a spiritual meaning. Why do you put a light up on a pole in a room? To get rid of darkness. And how do you get rid of darkness? You add light, and when you add light, darkness is gone. Now bear with me a moment, if you want to make a room dark, what do you do? You don't add darkness you take away the light because darkness is the absence of light.

And now think of that in a spiritual context. Where God is not, or where His ambassadors, who are light, are not; there is darkness. And in this world, we always like to talk in extremes. You know the highest place on the planet is Mount Everest. The lowest place is at the very bottom of the Marianas Trench. Have you ever heard someone talk about the darkest place? I know I was taught that the darkest place, and if you Google it you'll find it still true today, (at least on the Internet) that the darkest place on the earth is the Rock de Los Muchachos Observatory in the Canary Islands. It's so far away from civilization, that the only light that is there is the light that comes from the heavens at night.

Now of course those of us living here in Lodi, or Jackson, or up in Valley Springs, you know better. At least if you've been to Moaning Caverns because they take you in their cave, and they take you down where you're way away from the entrance, and they turn the lights off. They have you put your hand up right in front of your face, you can't see it. They have you put your hand on your nose, at least that's what they

did with me when I was up there as a child, and I still could not see the fingers. It was amazing. Now that's true darkness! The absolute absence of light.

So, I'd like to ask, 'what do you think is the spiritually darkest place in the world?' It would be a place that would fit into what our gospel talks about. A place where there's no light, where there's evil thoughts sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these things come from, (what does Jesus say) our hearts. And these are the things that defile us it's not what we eat, or that kind of stuff no it's what comes out of us that defiles us and where do you see this kind of stuff being on full display? The digital world, social media, Facebook, Twitter etc. It's all over but I'd like you to consider what the result is. It destroys.

When I was growing up, we talked about how fast rumors or gossip could spread. We'd say it was like wildfire. Some of you might remember that movie "Grease." I know it dates me, but in that movie there's a girl named Rizzo. She's dating a guy named Kinicki, and she thinks she's pregnant. She tells her friends. As soon as she tells her friends, one of those friends turns and tells another one, 'Rizzo thinks she's pregnant.' And she's going to go now and talk to her boyfriend. And so, as she's walking, you see the people sharing that word from one to another, so that it gets to the boyfriend before she even gets to him; and he turns and says "so what's the news? I heard that..." And if you think that's fast, think about how fast it's moving on the Internet now. Where it doesn't just go by the speed of gossip from person to person; it's digitally spread everywhere. And what is the result of that? It's destructive. It's very dark!

In February and March of 2021, in the United States, there was a 56% increase in the suicide rate among those 12- to 17-year-olds. That is a 56% increase from the previous two months, which were an increase over the previous two months, which were an increase... and you get the idea. It's devastating! Our children had been forced into using the digital realm for school and what has happened is they've also gone into all these other areas. They've also seen people write about them, and it spreads so fast to everyone, and people jump on the bandwagon; that they find

themselves in a very dark place, feeling all alone, and they take their life. It's digital destruction. Now you might be saying, Pastor Matt, we've heard you say that you're a simple guy, that you know you are a low-tech guy in a high-tech world. You like working with the chainsaw more than with the computer. So obviously, you're going to say this kind of stuff. Yeah, there is some truth to that, but you know I've also heard it said that on every coin you will find there is always a head behind every tail. Then on every die, as in dice that we roll, there was always a one behind the six. What is that saying? There is always two sides to every story.

It's kind of like the nuclear world. Nuclear fission could power an entire metropolis like Southern California, it could also vaporize it in a millisecond. And I would contend, that is also very much the way the digital world is. If the digital world is allowed to just run amok, and people can say or write whatever they want. What we read in James that the tongue, what we say, what we write, can set on fire the entire course of life. He says that with that kind of talk, we can bless God one minute, and then the very next minute we can curse, condemn that which is created in God's image, (that's you and me, that's mankind.) What does he say about it? This is a restless evil, full of poison.

And so now we go back to the concept of; you were now the light to the world. And we see a very dark place, spiritually dark place, the digital world that can destroy and crush people in minutes. And yet just like a nuclear bomb, nuclear fission; we can either use it to destroy or to light up. And you might say, Pastor Matt, that is just what we're doing right here, right now, with this church service in the digital realm. We are bringing Jesus, the Light, into the digital world! And I say 'Amen to that. Yes, we are. And you might say Pastor Matt, we did Isaiah Bible study this morning and on Sunday nights we're doing the walk through the Bible, and we're doing that also so people can join us on the Internet. We got people joining from Arizona and Southern California and all over. we're at it!'

You're absolutely right. But this is where the rubber meets the road, that's all the corporate effort of the church. What about you? What are you doing on the Internet? When we look again at the book of James, James talks about worldly wisdom that doesn't come from above and it's

marked by a number of things. It's earthly, it's unspiritual, it's demonic is what he says. And he says that it's there where you find jealousy and selfish ambition. The exact opposite of humility. And what is the result of that? There will be disorder and every vile practice. That is what we're seeing a lot of. But dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what are we called to do? We are called to be a light and we are to have wisdom from above. And James says in that same chapter; chapter 3:17 and 18 that wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And the result of that, a harvest of righteousness, is sewn in peace by those who make peace.

And so, last week I talked about how good it is that we humble ourselves as three congregations, and we work together in unity and I'm seeing wonderful things there. But we've got to get outside of just our three buildings. If you're watching today on the Internet, at home or if you're here in church; or if you're watching it live stream up at Jackson or Valley Springs consider that computer, that phone, that pad that you have as a whole other place of ministry and let your light shine there. Bring Jesus there to the chat line and when someone is tearing someone down or being mean or spewing filth, counter it with heavenly wisdom. Shine, because you are the light of the world an ambassador for Jesus Christ.

In our Saviors' Name, Amen.