



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Finding the Uninvited Christ in Exile

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 25, 2017

The Third Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Genesis 21:8-21, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

This week was so very hard. First the dash cam video of a police officer shooting Philando Castile to death became public. Remember that Castile, a school cafeteria worker in Minnesota, last year was shot to death in his car with his girlfriend at his side and their baby girl in the backseat. In the video the officer shoots Castile to death forty seconds after he first approaches the car. The tape became public after the officer was acquitted of all criminal charges by a jury of his peers, of our peers, and dare I say of us. This tale brings along with it all of the other officer-involved shootings, attacks on police and Congressmen and women, and all terror attacks around the world that result from the cheap manufacture and sale of handguns and assault weapons in this country.

And then at the end of the week our elected officials revealed a plan to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. News reports tell us that women and their specific health needs are barely mentioned in the 142 pages of this new plan. Planned Parenthood will no longer receive government funding to provide health care. Among other things this bill will replace high insurance premiums with high deductibles and will make care unavailable to many people and too expensive for all of us. It is estimated that this bill will roll back coverage from 20 million people. Many people are unaware that Medicaid covers most of the 1.4 million elderly people who live permanently in nursing homes. For people who want to die at home, Medicaid covers the home care when individuals and their families no longer have resources to pay for it themselves.

It was a hard week and I felt more alienated or exiled than I did even in early 1980's. I was a young seminarian discovering and beginning to live into the experience of being a gay man studying to be a priest, and it was not easy. I was introduced to a small circle of gay men who lived "secret" lives throughout the fifties, sixties, and seventies and were quite successful. I also met other clergy who were out of the closet and out of work. The lesson I learned was that I would have to be secretive if I ever wanted to be ordained and serve in active ministry. This lesson served me well as I left the seminary in 1985, and I accepted my first position in the Diocese of Arizona. I served the requisite six months as a deacon, and I was ordained a priest. The twin epidemics of AIDS and homophobia consumed the gay community and threatened our survival. I realized that I could not continue my secret life. A month after ordination I came out and quickly learned what it meant to be "other."

At the time I read a book called *Embracing the Exile* by John Fortunato. In his book Fortunato, a psychotherapist, a monk, and spiritual director, calls upon the gay and lesbian community—now referred to by the much more inclusive title the LGBTQI community—to recognize our story as part of God's story of the exiled people of Israel. In the exiled communities there was a tension between those people who wanted to remain separate and maintain their identity and those exiles who wanted to fit in and become assimilated. Fortunato described a new way and called upon the exiled LGBTQI community to embrace the exile without giving up our identities. This is no compromise between separatists and assimilationists. It is instead an accepting of life on life's terms. As Ramón Estevez (also known as Martin Sheen) has said, "We just accept the cup as offered, not altered."¹ When we accept life on life's terms even in the worst of times, we find God's love more powerfully in

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/martin-sheen-spirituality-of-imagination/>

exile rather than in times of comfortable stability. As I read this book, it helped me to see my own exile as a way to encounter God in a strange place and to identify with and serve other exiles.

Like Hagar in the first lesson, I felt as if somehow the world had exiled me and people like me out into a wilderness. And yet like Hagar, I found comfort in my exile. It was not in the form of a voice from heaven or a well of water, but it was comfort from God. For me comfort came in remembering a verse written by Thomas Merton about the incarnation. Merton wrote, "Into this world, this demented inn, where there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited."²

The coming of God in Christ into the human family can, on first examination, seem comforting. God with us. And yet when we listen to the words of Jesus in the Gospel reading this morning, they are not so comforting. They are in fact disruptive. Have no fear of the authorities, he says, "for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." He almost sounds like a first century Harvey Milk encouraging us to come out or John Fortunato telling us to embrace the exile.

And Jesus, who never seems content with comfort, once again challenges us to go beyond our comfort zone. This Jesus goes on to ask us to be more committed to his message than we are to our families and even our own lives. He says, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

A few weeks ago Krista Tippet was interviewing Enrique Martinez Celaya, a Cuban philosopher, artist and exile. Martinez speaks of growing up as a child in a small town in Cuba, and at the age of eight he was taken by his parents into exile in Spain. In Spain, he says, "I became familiar with not belonging somewhere." Martinez Celaya notes one of the consequences of being an exile is that you lose the familiar sense of knowing that you belong somewhere [but, in the experience of loss] the exile gains the world. In many ways, he says, the exile "can find the freedom to look at and learn from the experience other exiles and their experiences of displacement and loss and then incorporate it, [into our own lives] without having to 'tie it up' with our own exile experience."

Jesus says it this way: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." By our willingness to give up the peculiarities of our own private exiles and join them to the experiences of others, we lose our stories and gain the stories of all people. We discover ourselves and everyone else welcomed home, home to the love of God. In the strange calculus of love, until all of us get this message of comfort in exile, none of us will escape the exiled sense of otherness that has plagued humanity since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden.

It has been seven years since Bill Tully and Buddy Stallings invited me to join my story with the stories of exiled people of God here at St. Bartholomew's Church. I am certainly joined with those served by the shelter, soup kitchen, and the food pantry but also with all of you, many of whom have come to feel the otherness, the strangeness of exile.

They have not been easy years. The number of people who sleep on the streets and are at risk for hunger has increased. The over- incarceration of African American men continues to rise, immigrants are deported in increasing numbers, even when it meant splitting up families. Many states have been successful in limiting the reproductive rights of women, and reported gun violence continues to rise. And in Europe and the Middle East we hear of more exile and tragedy. In fact I have come to understand that in the 21st century many people—or maybe all people—experience themselves as other or in exile from community.

² <http://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/christmas-readings/watch-for-the-light>

And so at this moment in time, when more and more people all over this country and around the world feel their own otherness magnified by social media and the 24-hour news cycle, “into this world, this demented inn, where there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited.” And not only that, he makes demands on us. He calls us into a community of forgiveness and love, and he invites us—the LGBTQI community, the St. Bart’s community, the American people, and people around the world—to embrace our own exiles and to lose our particular stories by listening and paying attention to all alienated and exiled and separate people. We are called to unite our experience of exile with the experience of others, to embrace them, and to realize that it is the only way for any of us to discover and truly believe that we are all loved and find our home in God. So go forth and march, people of God. March into the world and, like our uninvited Christ, let everyone know that they are loved and called to love.

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