

Much of what we have done at this convention has centered on vision, and mission, and a sense of purpose. As I said yesterday, it's not so much that the Church HAS a mission; it's that the Church has a function in the already up-and-running mission of God.

God's vision for creation is unity – union with God and one another. And God's mission is reconciling a world which is alienated from God, alienated from one another, and alienated from our truest selves.

I remember taking a class in seminary entitled "Ascetical and Mystical Theology," and one of our instructors was Bishop Mark Dyer of Bethlehem. Mark had once been a Benedictine monk. At any rate, something he said stuck with me. (They say that education is what you have after you've forgotten everything.) It wasn't anything new, but it was an epiphany for me.

He said [in effect]: “The purpose of the Church is reconciliation. And the way we do that is “reveal God.” Reveal. Manifest. Make known. In that sense, we are an “epiphany people.” We are called to make God known, and to take that a step further, we make God known by word and deed.

Yesterday Bishop Holguin spoke about mission in the Dominican Republic, and he talked about the dove with two wings: proclamation and service. It takes two wings for the bird to fly: proclamation and service, or word and deed. By word and deed we proclaim the Good News of God’s love for all people. That’s our purpose, whether in Lubbock, or Dalhart, or Coleman, or the Dominican Republic. Proclaim the Gospel.

Recently I was privileged to hear Mark Hanson speak (the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America). He was remembering back about 3 decades when the Lutherans made that their official name: EVANGELICAL Lutheran Church. And Lutherans were worried that they were going to be confused with another brand of American evangelicals, and there was mild resistance. Of course, the word evangelical connotes the word “gospel.”

So there was a certain irony (many years later) when for a one year period he put a moratorium on using the word “gospel.” No one in his diocese was supposed to use the word “gospel.” Of course, the clergy were expected to preach the Gospel – but, without using the word. And everyone was forced to unpack the word, and find ways of preaching it with power without using church jargon.

Of course, the word “gospel” means “good news.” Two thousand years ago in the Roman world it was the word used any time good news was announced from the emperor. So when the angel announced to the shepherd, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people,” the angel was using familiar vocabulary.

But the angel was proclaiming a radically different message – a shocking message: not so much that a messiah or savior was born; that claim was not unusual.

What turned the world upside down (Huston Smith tells us) was the Christian claim that God assumed a human form; that God was born a baby, and lived a human life; that God was willing to take on human flesh and live as a limited human being, and suffer, and die – that was the impossible, unbelievable, and even blasphemous claim of the Incarnation.

That's the claim which was new; the claim which was "good news." For this meant that God cared enough about creation; cared enough for you and me; was concerned enough about all of humankind to become flesh, and not only suffer with us, but suffer for us.

The Gospel which the angel proclaims is the Good News of God's love as made known in Jesus – a total love, a love without conditions, a love which we have no power to increase or decrease, a complete love.

Today's reading from John's Gospel sets us in the Upper Room at the Last Supper. Jesus and his followers have shared the Sacred Meal. Jesus has washed his disciples' feet. And as anyone might do on their last night (a teacher surrounded by students; a grandfather surrounded by grandchildren), Jesus conveys what is important in life.

He says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love."

He goes on to say, “This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.” That seems to be the highest priority for a dying man, Jesus.

Jesus commands his followers not only to proclaim the Good News of God’s love, but for us to love one another as he does – to love without conditions (good, bad, neighbor, or stranger); to love without expecting anything in return; to forgive the undeserving; to forgive the ones who never apologized first.

I could say that’s our lesson for the day. We’ve heard our moral duty, and we can all go home completely overwhelmed and feeling guilty for our failures. Two things in response to that: first, Christianity is NOT a dynamic between failure and success. It’s not my observation that any of us outgrows saying the General Confession – “we have not love our neighbors as ourselves.” Our story is not about success and failure. Christianity is about death and resurrection; dying and rising to new life; sin and redemption. So forgive yourselves; God has.

Secondly, I would like to offer something from one of my favorite theologians – Beatrice Bruteau. To paraphrase, she says that throughout history we have devised ethical systems and have preached a great deal about morality – often cultivating guilt and demanding sanctions. And she observes that our preaching and punishing have been futile. It has not worked. Obviously.

And stating the obvious further, she says that we have an understanding of reality which sees others as outside us, different, in competition with us, alien to us. We see the world in terms of separation, alienation, and domination. And she wonders if how we see reality is false.

And what she offers is another understanding of reality – what she calls a “metaphysic.” By metaphysic she means “a spontaneous and natural worldview, the way we see reality without thinking about it, our taken-for-granted perception or outlook on life.”

And the metaphysic she offers, the understanding of reality she offers, comes from Jesus of Nazareth – the second of the two great commandments, when he says: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s not to “love your neighbor AS MUCH AS you love yourself.” It’s not to “love your neighbor IN THE SAME WAY AS you love yourself.” Bruteau suggests “it is to love your neighbor as ACTUALLY BEING yourself.” Maybe if that’s how we saw reality; maybe if this perception became a natural, spontaneous, taken-for-granted way of seeing the world – she wonders – maybe our preaching would not be so futile.

I wonder. If I am honest it is only in the clearest of moments on the clearest of days that I might share her proposed perception of reality. But then again, mystics tend to see reality as one. The Apostle Paul writes – regarding the Body of Christ – that “the Body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the Body, though many, are one Body.”

It's true that he is writing of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ, but I am inclined to agree with recent scholarship that Paul was a mystic, and as all mystics tend to do, he saw the entire human family as connected, as at-one in God.

And Jesus, on his last night says, "I am the vine, you are the branches" – another metaphor suggesting organic connection.

Maybe that's one thing Jesus wants us to see, the vision he wants us to have, every time we gather around bread and wine to celebrate Holy Communion. I'm suggesting that every time we gather for our Sacred Meal (Communion), we see God's vision for the world: union with God and one another; all of God's children gathered around the Table at one. And not only do we see the vision, we participate in it with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven – all as one.

All in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.

