

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, February 2-3, 2019:  
*Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6,15-17; 1 Cor 14:12b-20; Luke 4:21-32*

*And now Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer – amen*

You may already know this, but we have a Eucharistic service almost every Wednesday morning at 9:30am in this sanctuary. I encourage all of you to attend when you are able; it is a special time before the Lord. What makes it somewhat different than our weekly Sunday worship together is that we usually get to remember and celebrate the life and sometimes the martyrdom of a Saint from our Christian past. To be clear, we do not worship these Saints, but we do hold them up as examples of men and (sometimes) women who lived a faithful life in service of our Lord, even to the point of death.

Two Wednesdays ago (the service this past week was cancelled on account of the snowpocalypse) we celebrated the life and martyrdom of St. Vincent, a deacon of the Church in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century during a time of extreme persecution. St. Vincent's ministry was primarily to be a personal aid and assistant to his Bishop, a rather mundane job. What is interesting, however, is that the Bishop had something of a speech impediment and regularly called on St. Vincent to address the congregation on his behalf – think of Moses and Aaron's ministry together. Well, eventually, the Bishop and St. Vincent were arrested and brought before a Roman magistrate. As was his custom, the Bishop deputized St. Vincent to speak on his behalf charging him to give a defense of their faith and hope in Jesus Christ. We don't know what St. Vincent said, but we know he did such a powerful and splendid job that the magistrate had only one response – he had St. Vincent executed. Note, the magistrate only exiled the Bishop who did not speak.

We see in St. Vincent, then, an example of a man (a relatively young man) willing to stand as a witness to the truth and love of Jesus Christ, even when he knew it may cost him his

life. Imagine yourself in his shoes; it must have been a rather terrifying experience. I imagine he must have prayed something like our appointed Psalm today, pleading for the Lord's intervention. And when it didn't come in the way he hoped it would (but make no mistake, the Lord was there with him), he still remained strong and gave his defense. When our time comes, and it looks increasingly like it will for some of us, will we have the strength, the resolve, the faithfulness to our Lord, Jesus Christ, to make the same sort of defense as St. Vincent, even in the face of death? Where would we get such strength and resolve from? Well, we get them, in part, from our hope of seeing God in Jesus face-to-face upon arrival at our heavenly home; in other words, we are able to stand strong and resolute in the face of persecution because of the hope and assurance that something, or rather, someone, infinitely better than anything we have experienced in this life awaits us on the other side. We know that we will gain more in heaven than we lose here. I think it is this hope that is at the heart of our Psalm today.

Before we get there, though, I suspect that some of you are stuck on my claim that it looks like our time to stand in the face of persecution is coming. So I'd like to take a few moments to consider a recent string of events that highlight a growing mainline bigotry against small-o orthodox Christians.<sup>1</sup> I'd also like to examine, all too briefly, some of the sources of this particular spirit of the age as I think it will help us see where our culture is and where it is heading. My hope is that this will inspire us toward developing strength and resolve in our hearts, which I think ultimately is a turning to Jesus, but I am getting ahead of myself.

Two weeks ago, Karen Pence, wife of Vice-President Mike Pence, announced that she would return to teaching art part-time at a private Christian school, named Immanuel, in the DC

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<sup>1</sup> As I mentioned in the preaching of the sermon, but failed to mention in the manuscript: By "small-o orthodox Christians" I mean those of us who remain faithful to the Faith as it was handed down from Jesus and the Apostles and is codified in the Scriptures, the Creeds and Councils, the Liturgies, and the teachings of the Church. St. Bart's is a small-o orthodox Church.

area. This particular school, and many other schools like it, requires its employees and the families of the students to sign a statement of faith. In this case, the statement includes an affirmation of marriage as being between one man and one woman and goes on to condemn any sex, heterosexual or otherwise, outside of marriage. This is pretty standard fare for schools like Immanuel. But you wouldn't know that from the backlash stirred up by politicians and the mainstream media. The *Washington Post*, for instance, acknowledges (begrudgingly) that the school is within its rights to do so, but condemns Immanuel for being "confrontational" and "driving wedges" simply to score points in Trump's world – you know, because no one actually believes such a traditional view of marriage. Not to be out done, *The New York Times* jumped on the bandwagon writing essentially the same story, including a quote from an expert on education that suggests, again, that Immanuel is backwards thinking, exclusive, nationalist, and divisive and therefore poses a threat to the educational institution in our country.

That wasn't enough for the *Times*, though. One of their writers, Dan Levin, went onto Twitter and jumped in on a couple of trending hashtags: #exposechristianschools and #exposechristianhomeschooling. He invited his followers and other Twitter readers to share their stories about their experiences at Christian schools and homeschooling for the exposé he is writing for the paper. So what? What's the big deal, you may ask. Well, as several commentators – including a Notre Dame law professor – have noted, the media is making a big deal out of what is essentially a nonstory in order to cultivate an atmosphere of mistrust and fear of small-o orthodox Christians like us. They are painting us as enemies and oppressors because we do not support LGBTQ rights *as they define them*.

Indeed, this has played out in real time for the students at Immanuel. Earlier this week a school in their athletic conference announced via an email that they would not play any games in

any sport that were hosted on Immanuel's campus. The students at Sheridan School feel too threatened to step foot on such an unsafe campus as Immanuel's, this despite the fact that they had done so numerous times in the past without incident,. Here is the thing, this was never an issue between these two schools until the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* ran their agenda driven stories. Note well too, the tuition at Immanuel is \$10k a year while it is north of \$35k a year at Sheridan. Which school do you think more of our elites send their kids to? Which school do you think is forming more of our future leaders?

Given the philosophical underpinnings of culture, such a growing hostility to toward Christianity shouldn't surprise us, especially as those philosophies are increasingly divided from the faith in God that reigned them in. Now that we are "post-Christian," the philosophical liberalism that our country was founded on is running unchecked into its own demise.

What do I mean by philosophical liberalism? I suspect most of you have encountered it in some sort of high school civ or history or American Government class. It is associated with thinkers like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Without getting too far into the weeds, they argued that human beings are naturally an autonomous self that had come to be oppressed by unnatural, outside authorities and traditions. In order for humans to be their true selves, they must be liberated – hence, liberalism – from the constraints of the church, the family, culture, and even nature (to name just a few "oppressors"). The goal being to regain our being as an autonomous, individual self that is defined by the choices we make as such. Thus, liberty and freedom are redefined as the ability to freely choose whatever I desire; and society, including the family, is recast as a freely entered into contract, a contract that can be broken at anytime – even in the case of parent child relations (think of the recently passed abortion law). For much of our history this liberal impulse was regulated by a commitment to a transcendent authority, namely,

God. But now that God has been removed from public discourse, we are left only with the Self and the quest for its complete and utter liberation. This is, in part, why we see so many of our intermediary institutions like the family, the church, and other local associations failing.<sup>2</sup>

It is also why small-o orthodox Christians are being cast as public enemy number one. You see the historical faith in Jesus as it has been passed down to us in the Scriptures, the Creeds and Councils, the Liturgies, and the Teaching of the Church, is antithetical to philosophical liberalism's vision of the human creature, so we must be overcome. Think back to the Garden in Genesis 1-3. First, we see God create Adam, and so the Church has rightly understood that human creatures are dependent and subject to an authority greater and outside of ourselves. Accordingly, freedom to choose has not been the historical Christian understanding of freedom and liberty. Instead, freedom is the ability to be as we were created to be; that is, in intimate relationship with the Triune God who created us. Second, even in the context of this as of yet unbroken relationship with his creator, Adam was alone without a human companion – a situation that God himself deemed "not good." So God made Eve to be a companion and helper for Adam. As such, Christianity has rightly understood the family, *not the individual*, to be the basic human unit. Indeed, it is in the complimentary difference of male and female, which enables us to create new life, that we see, at least part of, the Image of God. The human creature was created for relationship: first with God, then with other humans. This is the logic of the Two

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<sup>2</sup> For a great and mostly accessible discussion of liberalism's presuppositions and how its success is actually leading to its failure (a discussion that has shaped some of my thought in this sermon), see Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*. The one qualm I have with Deneen's book is that he does not deal directly with the related theological shifts in our culture, which can give the impression that our problems are primarily political/philosophical. To be fair, Deneen is a political scientist not a theologian (though he is a Christian), and he does point to certain shifts related to religion and theology in our society. Two great books that discuss the religious/theological shifts in our culture (and are directed at lay people) are James K. A. Smith's, *How (Not) to be Secular*, and Hans Boersma's, *Heavenly Participation*. These are two of my favorite Christian writers, with Smith being one of the foci of my ongoing thesis project (but don't worry, not the aforementioned book).

Great Commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Properly understood, these commands don't constrain us; they liberate us to be who God created us to be.

And this is precisely why the liberal, secular humanist agenda will increasingly seek to marginalize, suppress, and even persecute small-o orthodox Christians. Our Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, celebrates our dependence on the Triune God and his salvation in Jesus Christ. We recognize that this Gospel has a necessary social component that binds us to other humans, especially those Baptized into Jesus. We know that freedom and liberty are only found in Jesus, and so we are able to name the twinned pursuits of LGBTQ and Abortion "rights" what they are: idols and therefore slavery! And so it is that I think our time of tribulation, whether physical, emotional, or economic, is on the horizon.

Back to the question then, how do we, like St. Vincent, stand strong, resolute, and faithful in the face of our own persecution? In short, which I have to be, we do so, in part, by cultivating a love and a hope for our eternal home, which ultimately is to be in the eternal presence of Jesus Christ. As Jesus says, "this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."<sup>3</sup> Just as importantly, earlier in the same conversation before his own persecution, Jesus comforts his disciples by telling them: "Do not let your heart be troubled, believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."<sup>4</sup> So in the first verse, we learn that knowing the Father through Jesus is eternal life; and in the second passage, we learn that knowing Jesus is an intimate union that is figured in the union of a husband and

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<sup>3</sup> John 17:3

<sup>4</sup> John 14:1-3

wife. We know this because it was the custom when Jesus was on earth for a man and a woman to be legally wed at the time of their engagement; however, they would not be able to consummate the marriage until after the bridegroom had built an apartment onto his parents' home for him and his new bride to live in. Once he had completed the apartment, he could bring his bride into their new home in order to consummate and seal their union as husband and wife.

Here is the Psalmist's plea for the Lord to be his, "strong rock, a castle to keep me safe," fulfilled: in our union with and in the presence of Jesus the Bridegroom we are brought into the sanctuary of Jesus the Temple, as John's Revelation describes him. Moreover, here is the true freedom for which the Psalmist longs. Recall, freedom is the ability to be as we were created to be – that is, in intimate relationship with our Creator the Triune God. There is no more intimate relationship than marital union. In agreement with these two realities expressed through the Psalm, St. Paul can describe our persecutions on earth as "light and momentary"<sup>5</sup> or "not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."<sup>6</sup> St. Paul knows what freedom, what bliss, what glory awaits him when he abides with Jesus in the mansion Jesus has prepared for him (and us) in the Father's house. In other words, St. Paul knows that we will gain more than we lose when we come home to heaven.

Saints, if we have this love too, it is possible for us to hold this life and its possessions loosely. To stand as St. Vincent and St. Paul did, we must cultivate a heart for Jesus and our heavenly home that sees them as gain no matter the cost. That is what Belong, Equip, and Reach are all about, cultivating this love. Contrary to the philosophical liberalism that undergirds our culture, we are created for community – first with God and then with our neighbors. Our commitment to Belonging leans into this by recognizing that love is only cultivated as we belong

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor 4:17

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:18

to the community of God's people, the Church. Incidentally, this is where we have the most to offer the world around us. As our intermediary institutions (such as families, local associations, etc.) continue to fail, the Church, this church, St. Bart's can fill the void by offering the love, hospitality, and fellowship of Christ to our neighbors. You want to reach your millennial family and friends? This is how we do it: By offering a loving place to belong. Equipping is about cultivating this love in our community through Word and Sacrament as well as through the spiritual disciplines so that we can go and reach. Reach is just that, it is reaching our family, friends, and neighbors with the love, hospitality, and fellowship of Jesus expressed in the context of belonging. Reaching may require pain and suffering on our part – be it physical, emotional, or economic. It may require us to stand strong, resolute, and faithful as we give our defense of our faith in the face of persecution. But in the love of Christ and the hope of our eternal home in heaven with him, we can do just that.

*To the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – amen.*