

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you don't think humanity takes things too far in our quest for instant gratification think about this- somewhere right now, someone is designing a way for a drone to deliver pizza to your front door. It's happening, right now...I promise you. Google it. I'm sure I could have given you a more noble example, but I haven't noticed a lot of nobility in humanity's pursuits as of late. Perhaps my cynicism is driven by the fact that every time I turn on my tv or look at my phone, I see the most direct and obvious ways that we use to hurt each other, to push our own agendas despite the consequences. This is of course not unique to our time- we have always found ways and voices that highlight the worst parts of ourselves.

So I've had enough - I'm in the mood for an obvious God-a God that intervenes in clear and concrete ways- a superhero God who swoops in and makes it all better. Or a vengeful lightning bolt God who throws power and wrath down upon those who would threaten and kill his beloved children. And in today's readings, you get just that- an obvious God that strikes the persecutor blind and changes him into a beloved and prolific apostle. Disciples dramatized as desolate fisherman, pulling up net after empty net, only to be visited by their risen savior and given more fish than their nets could hold. Now, there is an obvious God- instant gratification, fish and salvation for all.

Let's start with Saul, soon to be Paul. He's the worst. As the text says, he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the lord." Notice that language, breathing- his hate was so intrinsic to who he was, that it was as automatic as the air he breathed. And yet, for some reason, God thinks this man has it in him to be the herald of Christ's love and salvation to the world.

I was talking to one of my hospice patients about this passage- I read it to him and asked him what he thought when he heard it. He just looked at me and said- you see, God can change your life in an instant. I told him I would give him credit for that in my sermon, so thanks Joe. And he's right, but for some reason it just seems too easy. Blinded for a few days, able to hear the voice of God, and then given a holy mission to fulfill. A mission to proclaim and love the very same people that three days earlier you wanted to kill? Paul had built a life on hate and destruction and in an instant, God changed his life to one of peace and proclamation.

Paul got his own mini apocalypse on that dusty road. I wonder what the first thing was that he saw when those scales dropped from his eyes? Whatever the scene, I'm sure it was engraved into his memory- the first glimpse of his new life with God. The rhetoric of hate changed to the language of love. And folks, in this conflicted world we live in, doesn't that sound good? I'd much rather be blinded by God than blinded by hate.

Over the past few months, I've heard a lot of frightening rhetoric that emphasizes fear and suspicion- that casts cautious glances at differences and promotes division. But I don't think anything has really shocked me until I saw a clip from a recent political rally-- there was a group of angry men, standing together, and when asked a question about whether or not they thought love was important, one man looked directly into the camera, and without hesitating said: "There is no love in this world."

Think about the weight of that simple statement: There is no love in this world. It made my stomach churn and it also brought back some very unpleasant memories.

Do you remember the first time as a child you heard someone speak hateful things about another person, another race, another gender- whoever that "other" may be? Growing up in the

deep South, I would sometimes go to family reunions or events and at times I would hear some members of my family say things that were intolerable, that were racist, that cast a sharp judgement over people as a whole- these are all pretty ways of saying that I heard some hate as a child. And I was in a privileged position- the hate, the fear the suspicion- wasn't directed at me- I didn't have to worry about my safety or wellbeing, I only had to worry about my feelings.

And I remember, having this feeling- this pit in my stomach when I heard these words, these tones of voice. It hurt to hear- not because I had some cavalier understanding of right and wrong, but maybe because I was a child- and children aren't hardwired to hate. And now when I look at the crowds in some of these rallies where hate and fear slip off the tongue like poisoned honey, I look around for the children that have been brought there by their parents or caregivers. I wonder what they are feeling. Does their stomach hurt, do they feel somewhere in their hearts and minds like something isn't right? And so what if they do? Maybe it's just childhood naiveté...or maybe it's God. The God that said "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Those Gospel Children can recognize God in an instant, and they run toward Jesus...for the rest of us, it may take a little more work.

It takes a little while for the disciples to recognize Jesus in that old fishing boat. But, I bet the disciples' eyes lit up like children when they pulled the net from the sea to find it full. After all, it had been empty for so long. Think of all the times in your life that you kept trying and trying and still come up empty. And we pray that God will show up and tell us to try something different, throw the net out on the other side...Now, I know God isn't always so obvious...we

search sometimes in vain for that almighty hand, but when God does show up, our lives can change in an instant.

We want the big stories, the obvious miracles, the drastic changes...but sometimes we have to look a little closer- beyond the headline, the attention grabber, the easy read. Hatred is easy to find, but Love is far more prevalent. We cannot let the bright light that shines on the actions and words of a few, overshadow the power and love of God. We can't waste time casting the same nets in the same places over and over again- God wants us to try something different- right now there are disgraceful laws and dishonesty and fear- but there is more than that- cast your nets on the other side of the boat- there is kindness and love and forgiveness- our nets can be full.

There's a brilliant experiment happening right now on a playground at an elementary school in Canada. It's called the Buddy Bench. If you're at recess and you find that you don't have anyone to play with, no game to join, or if you feel left out- you can go and sit on the buddy bench- it's a sign that you want to play, want to engage- when another child sees someone on the bench, they go over and ask if they want to play or join a game. Seven year old Matthew said that "before we had this, I used to see a lot of kids walking around by themselves, but now that we have this, we have people to play with." And kids at the school use it all the time- with no stigma attached-the bench offers friendship, and the basic human desire to feel connected, one with another.

Well guess what folks, that little playground experiment- that's the Gospel. That simple, but brilliant idea casted it's net on the other side and came up full. It sought to make neighbors, to stifle fear, to combat loneliness, to have the chance to both give and receive an invaluable gift.

So, don't listen to the angry men on your television screen that tell you there is no love in this world. Because there's one less lonely child on a playground, there's one more child who took a risk, walked over to a stranger and asked if they wanted to play. Because that's what we're called to do as the church- not to exclude, alienate, stick to what we know or perhaps the easiest thing of all, just to give up. If we as the church are just a monument to the past, to the glory days of belief and the church system, then there's no point- just go home. No need to spend time dusting off statues and worshipping past idols. We could be doing something more relaxing like eating brunch. But, here we are- the church- one foot in the past and one foot in the shifting sands of the present. We can't stand still- we can't wish for what was- we have to drag the gospel into the world by insisting that God's love is more powerful than humanity's pain.

So don't be afraid of being obvious in the ways in which we practice the commandment to love God and our neighbor. We need obvious love and an obvious God in a world of subversive hate. We can't be blinded by habits and mediocrity-I pray that like Paul, we too may have the scales drop from our eyes, and remember how to look for love in a blind world. Amen.