

The world did not end. I have to remind myself of that every once in awhile, when things feel so out of control. Sometimes my freak outs are warranted and sometimes they are not. And yet, as Christians we are not called to be content in the world in which we live. We are not meant to stay here forever. We are called to look for the day when we feast at the heavenly banquet and it is on earth as it is in heaven. The next three Sundays we have readings from the Revised Common Lectionary that lead us through the Apocalypse. We are nearing the end of the Liturgical Year before we start all over again in Advent. But before we get to the good news of great joy, before the wisemen visit, before we hang any greens we must go through the end.

Our reading today from the Gospel according to Matthew highlights that the end time is coming and we need to be prepared. And yet we do not yet know when or how. There have been predictions for generations of a specific date & time when the world will end and well, we are all still here. And yet it is important for us to remember, that no matter how great it is here, this is not our final destination. I've found I needed that reminder in the last couple of weeks. The stress and anxiety of this last year has been intense. Wouldn't it be nice if we had the opportunity for a magical fairy tale ending but the Gospel reading does not give us that!

The Kingdom of God is not Disneyland where everything superficially nice, no matter how beautiful and exciting it may be. The Kingdom of God is marked by those who do not live for themselves but for God. The Kingdom of God on earth is not filled with riches, lavish decorations or fancy food. The Kingdom of God is recognized through the living of the love of God and neighbor. The Kingdom of God is not about me or you but about us.

I was in 5th grade when something took hold of me in the Claymation holiday special Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer. I had seen it so many times there was nothing new or exciting to the story. As a reminder Rudolph was a misfit none of the other reindeer wanted to play with him. Hermey the elf was a misfit because he wanted to care for teeth, not make toys. And as they travel together, they happen upon Yukon Cornelius and the Island of Misfit Toys. On this island we find the Charlie in the Box, train with square wheels, a pink polka dot elephant and other different toys. They were there because they thought that no one wanted them. God wants us even if we are a misfit on the island of misfit toys. God not only wants us but calls us to want each other.

The Kingdom of God is a place where we recognize the gift God has in each of us. The Kingdom of God is the living out of the Beatitudes that we read last week. The Kingdom of God is not

insisting on our own way but rather living our lives for God and each other. The entrance to the Kingdom of God is through the cross. The cross, with all of its suffering and shame is for each of us. Only through the sacrifice of Christ do we have the entrance to the Kingdom of God. When we are left to our own devices, we make mistakes. When we are left to our own devices, we choose the fruit from the one tree God told us not to eat from. When left to our own devices, we fashion a golden calf. When we are left to our own devices, we call out for Barabbas not Jesus. The cross reminds us all that we are in no place to judge. It is only God, with a depth of love that we never fully understand, who continues to reach out to us to show us the Kingdom of God.

It is too easy to see the parable of the 10 Bridesmaids as a judgment on those who are not prepared. A seminary teacher, Dr. Dirk Lange taught this: “Those who are enduring misfortune, even poverty, for Christ's sake are not the one who will be quick to judge others. Judgment is now purely reserved for God who alone knows or recognizes each individual. Grace is in the cross that lets shine forth a light, a light so unique that people do not praise our good works but rather praise God who is acting and giving life in the midst of suffering, life in the midst of death, opening the door to those who have engaged the way of the cross, who have engaged the way of death. The world cannot understand this way.

It does not recognize the Lord though it continually cries out,
"Lord, Lord!"

The world does not understand the way of the cross is love. The world is constantly asserting a path forward that is about self-fulfillment. The world has missed the loving actions of God and mistakes love as weak. The Kingdom of God, the one we pray to be on Earth as it is in Heaven is filled with love. Love of God and love of neighbor. And love is hard and time consuming. "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Love is not arrogant nor does it insist on it's own way." This love that God has for us and we are called to share is the love the Apostle Paul is writing to the community in Thessaloniki about. "But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, ¹¹ to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹² so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one."

Love calls us to work quietly without judgment. Love calls us to center ourselves on God. Love calls us to changes not only our heart and mind but the world around us. Love calls us to transform ourselves much like an oyster does with the irritant that gets into its shell. The oyster surrounds the grain of sand with fluid to coat the irritant. Layer upon layer of this coating surrounds the irritant until something beautiful is formed.

Imagine love as our defense mechanisms that surrounded those things which irritate us with grace.

So, we work to be known by our love. We work to welcome the misfits, whether Rudolph or ourselves in the family of God. We work to share grace in all that we say and do. We work in the shape of the cross We work to live not for ourselves but for the love & glory of God. We work until the Kingdom of God is on Earth as it is in Heaven. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.