

I hope you all had a good weekend... perhaps a Valentine special outing, perhaps not, perhaps with flowers and candy, perhaps not... Perhaps it's good to remember that it *is* a good skill to love oneself, which is really a necessity, even a prerequisite, to loving others. (Bible says "Love your neighbor as *yourself*.") Psychologists these days emphasize that *self-love* is so important... to take oneself out to dinner, buy flowers for oneself, etc. During my single or divorced days, I did get really good at taking a book to a quiet table in a restaurant, and I still do it off and on. Loving ourselves actually helps us to love others, and in the world of faith, we say that receiving the love and grace of God is what helps us to love others.

I did a little research on the history of Valentines Day. You may know that Valentine was a priest in the Roman Empire in the 3rd century. Historians relate that he performed Secret Weddings when they were banned by the empire. (The emperor believed that unmarried men made better soldiers!). Mid-February was the time of fertility rituals and signs of Spring in ancient Rome. But Feb 14 was also the time of St. Valentine's execution, for his loyalty to Jesus Christ as his Lord and God, not the Emperor. We recall that many Christians were killed for not renouncing their faith in Christ.

We know of so many others over the years who were persecuted or killed for standing up for the ways of Jesus. We know that Mahatma Ghandi, although a Hindu, liked to quote Jesus and practice nonviolence. We know that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted Jesus often....and of course, Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer leading resistance in Nazi Germany. They not only quoted Jesus, but practiced the ideals and mission of Jesus, to preach good news to the poor, and to liberate the oppressed,

In our reading this morning, Jesus speaks of salt and light. I'll start with light. The really fascinating thing is that while John speaks of Jesus as The Light that came into the world, Jesus is telling his followers that WE are light and called to shine. ("We are marching in the light of God" is our closing song.)

Many things are obvious as to what is Light: Simple things like sunny days, sunny dispositions, or warm firelight. Obvious to the eye is that light is the opposite of *darkness*. Works of darkness are mentioned often in the Bible... as works of evil, such as lying, violence and killing. Works of *light*, "being children of light," have to do with peacemaking and healing, and truth-telling! I love the idea of light as truth and truth-telling!

Jesus also used the image of SALT! Salt gives taste. It "accents" the food, stimulates the taste buds. If we are to be like salt, Jesus was trying to say that we can't be just "blah" in our faith. Remember that in the book of Revelation, the Risen Christ was warning churches not to be "lukewarm" in their faith, but to stand for something, to bring light into places of darkness. So salt could be considered a stimulus, a challenge to this world. We are called to be "salty;" sometimes this means edgy, pushing the envelope, challenging the status quo, breaking societal rules or policies when they are inhumane.

So many examples these days of things that need the light of truth and a salt of challenge. We remember that St. Valentine and many others were killed because they resisted the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. Sound familiar? Yes, I'm thinking of some of the brutal and inhumane policies of current leaders in our own country... and it comes from a mindset of imperialism, domination, and bullying. This mindset is revealed in trying to change the name of the Defense Department to the War Department (I don't know if

this is legally possible) It is a prime example of an aggressive, violent mentality, which we know is totally anti-Christian. Jesus clearly rejected all violence, he was rightly called the Prince of Peace. I do listen to people on all sides of issues. Regarding immigration, I agree there have to be processes or “laws” about coming into any country, but the key question is *how* do we carry them out in a humane fashion? A “zero tolerance” policy for undocumented people is very non-Christian in my opinion; there is no room for mercy and grace, no room to consider the circumstances, to hear an immigrant’s story.

We remember that Jesus did not do away with Jewish Laws, but he did break them when merciful healing and love was needed. I see an analogous thing regarding deportation laws. Sure, people can be told, even forced to leave, with due process, but not sent to some foreign prison known for unhealthy crowded conditions, and torture. Our own detention centers should not resemble concentration camps... We hear reports of people crowded in cells like sardines, with lack of health care, lack of clean drinking water, no time or privacy to bathe. Humiliating and inhumane. That is why sanctuary cities and safe places make sense in humane ethics. Many undocumented people are simply waiting for a very slow overwhelmed legal system.

Finally... it is taking place, that warrants and court orders may become necessary to detain and deport. By most all accounts, the percentage of violent criminals among those detained is embarrassingly small, like 14% at the most. Most have no criminal record, just civil misdemeanor or non-documentation.

Some conversation partners of mine challenge me about detention centers... reminding me that “cages” were there in previous administrations. Yes, there were plenty of deportations

during the Obama time, and the Bush time, and yes, there were chain-link fences looking like cages, but one important difference now is the heartless separation of families, to assign parents for deportation and then label the child as an “unaccompanied minor.” Separating a child from his/her parents is nothing but frightening, cruel and traumatic. One way to stop any such oppression is to make it public, to tell of it, to video it. Such was the change to segregation laws back the 1960’s. When atrocities against blacks were recorded and put on national television, even the hardest of hearts were moved, to see how wrong and inhumane were the policies. Perhaps that is what just happened in Minneapolis; with the help of video evidence, the whole country began talking about the brutal tactics of federal agents. .

So what is a Christian response? What would Jesus do? Jesus embodied the Way, the Truth, and the Light of God. Jesus was the “incarnate” Word... who came to point out sin, to point out evil, both personal and systemic... in order to liberate any oppressed. He did not resist the brutality of Rome with weapons. But he stood up for and spoke up for the poor and the oppressed, and was killed for doing so. He was King of kings and Lord of lords, not like most earthly kings who wield dictatorial power over others, but King moral, humane living, a Prince of peace. His Way and Truth and Light can dwell more and more inside of us, as we invite his spirit into our minds and into our hearts! That is the essence of communion: receiving Christ's love and grace, for ourselves, so that we can then share it generously with others. Amen.