

“Spiritual Wisdom”

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

Saint Paul, Minnesota

February 8, 2026

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Last week, in his final column for the *New York Times*, David Brooks observed that over the 23 years he'd been at the *Times*, “We have become a sadder, meaner and more pessimistic country.” Much that he values and believes upheld our culture has been diminished.

He wrote,

We're abandoning our humanistic core. The elements of our civilization that lift the spirit, nurture empathy and orient the soul now play a diminished role in national life: religious devotion, theology, literature, art, history, philosophy.

Our culture has eroded due to a loss of faith, resulting in the rise of cynicism and nihilism. Brooks perceived that for the nihilist,

Selfishness, egoism and the lust for power drive human affairs. Altruism, generosity, honor, integrity and hospitality are mirages. Ideals are shams that the selfish use to mask their greed. Disillusioned by life, the cynic gives himself permission to embrace brutality, saying: We won't get fooled again.

David Brooks, who, by the way, has spoken here at House of Hope as part of our Sunday Series, focused his attention on this key question: “How can we reverse this pervasive loss of faith in one another, in our future and in our shared ideals?”

Then he further reflected upon this question:

“I do not believe that most people can flourish in a meaningless, nihilistic universe. Despite what the cynics say, I still believe we're driven not only by the selfish motivations but also by the moral ones — the desire to pursue some good, the desire to cooperate, to care for one another and to belong.”

When I read Brooks's column last week, I couldn't help but think that we in the church *are* trying to uphold the ideals and values and even the art that Brooks sees on the decline. Once again affirming my vision that as we live through these troubled times, faithful people have a calling to be resilient communities upholding our spiritual and humane values.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth and the light of world. And St. Paul writes to the churches in Corinth about the wisdom that is revealed to them because they are agents of the Holy Spirit.

We possess holy treasures, and we possess them not only for our own good and well-being. We possess them as part of God's mission and on behalf of the entire world.

And one of these treasures is what we teach about the dignity of the human person.

On the cover of your bulletin is a quote from the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras from his magisterial work *Person and Eros*—"We recognize the person fundamentally as a *summons* or *invitation* to a relation which transcends the limitations of space and time."

What an incredible idea! That every person we encounter is an invitation into a relationship. And not just any mundane relationship, but one that lifts us out of ordinary time into the realm of the sacred and the holy.

Now, it's true that we don't have these rich relationships with every single person we encounter. Usually we are just trying to get through our own business, distracted by what is on our minds or our to do lists. Maybe we are irritable or having a bad day. Maybe they are.

But a central idea of Christian ethics is that each person we meet presents the possibility for a holy and sacred encounter, if we but follow the summons.

This notion is contrary to much of how we live contemporary life. Where other people are viewed often through the lens of utility—what use are they to the economy or achieving my own ends. The ways in which the wider culture views people through the lens of utility is what creates the possibility for viewing them as expendable or as irritants to be gotten out of the way. And the cruelty and violence we now witness, the callousness and disregard, the lack of compassion all result from failing to see other people through the spiritual wisdom and teaching of the Christian tradition.

I first encountered the theology of Christos Yannaras in the work of Andy Root, who is a professor at Luther Seminary. A month ago I quote Andy Root in my sermon that began the New Year. A sermon that feels like it happened in another age. In that sermon I preached about the ways in which we should find enjoyment. Because when we experience joy we experience the fullness of time. Joy is vital to a life of flourishing and well-being.

All of that remains true, even if the last month has not been an enjoyable one. But part of what has been so wonderful even in the midst of all the violence and the worry *has been* the moments of joy, inspiration, artistic creativity, even humor, as people have demonstrated skills of survival, resilience, and thriving.

In that New Year's sermon, I quoted Andy Root on the fullness of time. He wrote, "We long to find a true fullness that draws us not through time, into some future, but more

deeply into time itself. We long to live so deeply in time that we hear and feel the calling of eternity. We yearn to find once again the infinite in time, to find the sacred in the present, and therefore to be truly alive!"

Andy Root, drawing upon the theology of Christos Yannaras, teaches that one of the essential ways that we experience this fullness of time is in our relationships with one another. In how we connect to other persons in love. He writes, "the good life is fundamentally . . . a life of coming out of your self to meet and join another."

We experience our richest moments in relationships—as parents and children, as lover and beloved, as friends, as neighbors, as care-giver and recipient of care.

And all our encounters with other persons exist within the possibility of deep and rich relationship where we might experience love, delight, joy, and the holiness of being truly alive.

Here is the core of the Christian story, according to Andy Root, again drawing upon Christos Yannaras,

The Christian story is the narrative of the triune God who passionately arrives and encounters persons, speaking to them, delighting in them, being made sorrowful because of them. But this is all for the sake of leading these persons deeper and deeper into the very life of this God by saving them from the forces that would smother their personhood, even being willing, out of the ultimate act of [Love], to die for them so that they might live.

What if we approached every single person we encounter with the possibility of delight? Every single person as the invitation into the holy? Every single person as the summons to new heights of transcendence and joy?

Then we couldn't be cruel to that person, could we?

We've seen the difference so vividly in the last month. "I'm not mad at you, dude" said with a radiant smile. Versus those other words I won't say here, spit out with vile anger after taking a life.

Or the difference between putting your body in harms way in order to help someone up who has been pushed down and pepper sprayed, only to lose your own life.

In the last month, we've witnessed people living, and dying, as the salt of the earth and the lights of the world.

Last week the Atlantic published a fascinating article entitled "Americans Love Their Neighbors." If you haven't read it, you should.

The article starts out referring to trends and statistics that are all-too-familiar now about the loneliness epidemic, lack of social cohesion, the decline in people knowing their neighbors. But then the author, Julie Beck, makes this surprise observation:

The past couple of months, however, have shown that huge numbers of Americans do love their neighbors—enough to show up in frozen streets, confront armed federal agents, and even risk death. The response to Border Patrol and ICE's presence in Minnesota has prompted one of the greatest mass displays of neighborly love that I've seen in my lifetime.

Beck goes on to describe all the ways that Minnesotans have responded to this moment with heroic care. The mutual aid networks. Food distribution to those afraid to leave their homes. Driving neighbor's kids to school. Forming neighborhood safety patrols. Standing outside of schools during drop-off and pick-up time. Supporting local businesses and their workers who are impacted by closures. Gathering together to speak up for black and brown neighbors in ways that were frankly unexpected given the history of this country. And even putting safety, well-being, and life at risk. Often for people we do not know directly, but that we understand are our neighbors, just like us, persons with dignity, deserving of respect and kindness and love.

This outpouring of neighborly love has been a marvel to behold. And to participate in. And I hope we will take what we've created together in this moment and what we've learned about neighborliness, and keep that going, even after this immediate crisis fades. It is time to rebuild our world with the spiritual wisdom we are gaining.

I find it quite fortunate and serendipitous that the first week of January I began reading Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba's *Let This Radicalize You*, which really isn't a book about radical politics. It's a book about organizing for reciprocal care and mutual aid in response to violence. A perfect book to read at this time, and I've now quoted from it in pretty much every sermon or thing I've written since, because the book contains so many valuable lessons that perfectly match our moment.

Here is another. They write:

By building community and cultivating a sense of belonging between alienated people, we can begin a courageous process of dreaming new possibilities into being. We can also invite people to imagine what's possible by modeling and rehearsing the world as it should be in real time, in the spaces, groups, and relationships that we build.

That is precisely what Minnesota has been doing over the last month. Building community. Bringing alienated people together. Imagining new possibilities. Even modeling and rehearsing them. Actively engaged in creating a new and better world.

And the world has been watching. They see the city on a hill that cannot be hid, to borrow the Biblical image. And like salt and light, our actions here are now inspiring folks

to create their own mutual aid networks, get to know their neighbors better, to find ways to care for the marginalized.

Raphael Warnock was in town a week and a half ago, and he met with clergy and told us, "You have found yourselves at the center of whatever theological and spiritual thing God is doing right now."

And it sure feels that way, doesn't it?

Something new is being created here, something that can last, something that will make for a better world.

Because we've understood the wisdom of God and have truly loved our neighbors.

Let us be forever changed.

Amen.