

THE ANSWER TO HATE IS HOPE!

(12/02/18)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 5:3-5
Luke 2: 22-40

“We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”
(Romans 5:3-5)

Every year as the darker, shorter, and colder days of November and December descend upon us, we enter into the Advent season. The season of Advent is a time for us to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. With all that is going on in our country and around the world, I have the feeling that we—and also the world-- *really* need Christmas this year!

Of course, as our Advent candle lighters remind us, we are talking about the inner *spiritual experience* of Christmas, not simply the celebration of an historical event. We are talking about having Christmas become a reality in our lives. As the 12th century German mystic Angelus Silesius has said,

*Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he’s not born in thee thy soul
Is still forlorn.*

C. G. Jung once said that the world’s religions are the great collective therapeutic systems of humankind. Long before the birth of psychology, the religions of the world addressed the fundamental recurrent problems of human existence, and they still do. They address the meaning of life and the meaning of our individual lives. They address the experience of death and they give us resources to prepare for our death. They address the existential anxiety that comes when we are living our life off center. They address the existential depression that accompanies a collective and meaningless life. They provide us with a moral code to guide the living of our life and our relationships. They tell us about love, how important it is, and we should love both God and our neighbor. And they help us understand the roots of hate, that hate which brings suffering to our brothers and sisters and which poisons our very soul.

This is why we need Christmas this year! We need to experience both an individual and a collective psyche-therapy, a therapy of psyche or soul. We need this to counter the ubiquitous hate that is spreading over our country and over our world like a thick fog, a fog that keeps us from seeing one another clearly, that keeps us from seeing one another through the eyes of God, that threatens to blot out the light that God has sent to guide us, the light of the Christmas star.

I don't want to cite multiple examples of the emergence and prevalence of this hate. I don't want to do this because at times even I find the daily news to be depressing. I say "even I" because I am an incurable optimist! I tend to see the bigger picture. I take the long view that this is something that we probably need to go through if we are to move forward into a new and better world, a new and better life for *all* humanity. When I am confronted with words and actions that are hateful, that are contrary to what I think we stand for here in America, it strikes me as similar to what emerges when you rip a scab off a wound in order for the wound to heal properly, in order for healing to take place *from the inside out*. This is what nurses in burn centers like Shriners do for children suffering from massive burns. I know this is what *really* needs to be done, but I don't know if I could do it. I have tremendous respect, tremendous respect for these nurses.

Perhaps what is happening now both in our country and around the world is something that needs to happen. Perhaps we were deluded into thinking that we had become conscious enough and mature enough to be able to build a relationship with people who are different from us. Perhaps we were deluded into thinking that we had overcome our innate tendency to feel superior, to look down on others, and to persecute members of a certain racial, ethnic, religious, socio-economic group, or persons who are of a certain gender or gender identity to bolster our low self-esteem or to advance our own economic or social standing. Perhaps we mistakenly believed that religion had done its job in teaching us that everyone, everyone is a child of God and is thus our brother or sister. This is apparently not the case.

Hate crimes in our country increased 17% from 2016 to 2017, exceeding even the increase of the previous year.. Of the more than 7,100 hate crimes reported last year, 3 out of 5 were motivated by race and ethnicity. Religion and sexual orientation were the other two primary motivators. It is clear that something terribly wrong is taking place in a country whose identity and deepest values are built around the affirmation that all people are created equal!

This past Sunday, I returned home after church and settled down to read the Sunday paper. I had just experienced a worship service where we welcomed two people into full membership in our church, two people who expressed not only their desire to be a part of our fellowship, but who also renewed their commitment to deepen their relationship with God through Jesus Christ and to live, to the best of their ability, the Christian way of life. I drove home from the service with a good feeling about our church and the exceptional community of faith that we have here, a community that is open, affirming, welcoming, and inclusive. It's just the kind of community that people should want to join!

Then I glanced at that section of the paper that reminds us what happened on this date in previous years. On November 25, 1963 the body of President John F. Kennedy was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery; his widow lighted an “eternal flame” at the gravesite. I have been to Arlington to pay my respects to a president I admired and to view the “eternal flame,” but my eye was quickly drawn to another anniversary. In 1915, a new version of the Ku Klux Klan, targeting blacks, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants was founded by William Joseph Simmons. Mr. Simmons apparently felt that to make American great again or to keep it safe, we needed to create an organization dedicated to the persecution and eventual elimination of African Americans, Jews, Roman Catholics, immigrants, and refugees! This is really sad! I am more convinced than ever that we still need that eternal flame! I hope it never goes out—because this is the eternal flame of hope.

Our gospel reading this morning, the story of Simeon, takes place shortly after Jesus’ birth. Simeon was a devout man who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. Because he was exceptionally righteous, the Holy Spirit revealed to him that before he died, he would see the Messiah. When Jesus was brought into the Temple for the rites of purification, Simeon realized who this baby was! His hope had been realized! He took the baby in his arms and gave thanks.

Simeon *hoped* that he would be able to experience the presence of the Messiah before he died. In this Simeon is like us. We want to experience the risen Christ both within and among us. We want Christ’s transforming presence to heal our broken nation, to heal our broken world. Deep down we know this has to begin with us. We are the carriers of hope—each of us as individuals and also as a church. This is why we long for Christ to be born again in us.

There are many times in our lives when we need to feel, to experience hope. When people are depressed, they commonly feel helpless and hopeless. They feel helpless to change the reality that is pressing in on them from either the outside or the inside. Because they feel helpless in relation to the present, they feel hopeless about the future. Many people in America and around the world feel this way. I also feel this way from time to time.

The message of Christmas addresses our need for hope. It reminds us that we are neither helpless nor hopeless. It reminds us that God became present, became incarnate in our world through Jesus. It reminds us that God is always with us, that he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. It reminds us that even in the darkest of days, a light shines forth, a light that the darkness cannot extinguish. As Desmond Tutu has said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.”

If we have hope, we can find the strength, the courage to restore our nation and the world to sanity. We *can* create a world where *all* people can live together in peace and harmony. We can do this if we cling to the vision that was articulated so powerfully by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who said, “We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon.” Or Abraham Lincoln, who said, “My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth.”

The experience of hope and of a vision of a better life that come when we enter into the presence of God is not only an important theme of Advent and Christmas; it is an important part of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Communion is not just a service of remembrance; it is a service of presence. We believe Christ can be present to us in these common elements of bread and wine if we but open our hearts in faith.

In the words of our opening hymn, “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” we sing:

*King of Kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood,
Lord of Lords, in human vesture --
In the body and the blood --
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.*

In his humanity, Christ gave himself to us: his body and his blood. This is our hope and also our belief, the belief that Christ gives himself to us not only on Christmas, not only in this sacrament, but also in every moment of our daily lives. We can have that for which we, like Simeon, not only hope but deeply long. We can receive Jesus again this Christmas, in this sacrament, and in every moment of our daily lives if we but prepare a place for him in our heart. If we can do this, we empower him to heal our prejudices. And we help him take away or heal the hate that poisons our nation and the world.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
December 2, 2018*