

ADVENT III-THE ANSWER TO HATE IS JOY!

(12/16/18)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-19
Romans 15:13
Luke 2:8-14

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” (Romans 15:13)

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Each Sunday of Advent we light one of the candles in our Advent wreath and reflect on the spiritual gift symbolized by that candle: the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. We think about what it would mean to give birth to these feelings or attitudes in our lives, to bring them into the world, so to speak. When we do this, we give birth to the Christ, for the Christ is the incarnation of these gifts.

Advent is a time of waiting. We know what it means to wait. We sit impatiently at an intersection waiting for the traffic light to turn green. We act as if green were good and red were bad. We regard red as an interruption in our headlong flight through life. But is it? Perhaps red is exactly what we need. Perhaps we need to slow down, look around, enjoy the moment. If we move from our fixation with the future to an experience of the present, we might enjoy the shade of red in the light, the shape of the tree that is next to the intersection, the unusual architectural features of the buildings around us. Or we could just breathe.

Advent is not only about waiting; it is about preparation. The best preparation for the future is to live fully in the present. The best preparation for the kind of nation, the kind of world we would like to create: a world without poverty, hate, terrorism, and injustice is to live each and every moment as fully as we can. When we do this, as is illustrated in the Legend of the Rainmaker, we have a profound effect upon the world.

The first week of Advent, we lit the candle of hope. Hope is the affirmation that life moves forward. It is an affirmation of the ongoing creation and evolution of life, the ongoing creation and evolution of ourselves. This trust in the process of life can sustain us when we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness. Hope is built on the memory of what we have already experienced, what we have already endured. We need to remember those times when we were afraid, depressed, or lost. Even though we thought we could not survive those times, we did. Even though we thought the pain would never end, it did. Or at least it became more bearable.

Hope establishes goals toward which we aim, goals for which we strive. It helps us move forward into the future with confidence. A person without hope cannot live fully in the present because the opposite of hope is despair, and despair pulls us out of the present, out of the great flow of life. If we have no hope in something greater than ourselves, it is easy to become swallowed up in fear, the kind of fear that leads to hateful thoughts, feelings, words, and actions.

The danger of hope is also its strength--its focus on the future. We hope we will win the lottery, mistakenly believing that once we become rich, we will be happy. We hope that people in our lives, family members, will change as we wish them to change, will behave as we would like them to behave. Then we will be able to love them. By living in the future, we denigrate the present. We throw away the loving connection with others and with life that is the real gold!

Last Sunday, we lit the candle of peace. We long for national and international peace, for the time when nations and groups of people will be able to live together in harmony. We long for that inner peace which is the absence of anxiety, of worry about the future, about those parts of life we cannot control. We long for the experience of tranquility or serenity. Accompanying this experience of inner peace is the experience of inner stillness or silence. Or perhaps it is the other way around. When we become silent and still, we become more peaceful. This can happen in prayer as we enter into the great silence, the great peace of God.

Peace, however, is more than the absence of conflict. We cannot have peace in our world without justice. Jesus confronted the religious authorities of his day, just as Martin Luther King, Jr. did with the secular and political authorities of his. If people of vision back away from conflict, civilization will not evolve, it will devolve; in fact, it may not even survive. As we take a stand against the inequities and injustices of our time and our society, we hope to raise the consciousness of those whose beliefs we oppose. Just as Mahatma Gandhi called forth the conscience of the British to bring colonialism to an end, so we, in our own little way, might call forth people into a life that is free of prejudice and hate.

This morning, we lit the candle of joy. Once again, just as with the spiritual gifts of hope and peace, I believe joy is the answer to the problem of hate. I believe it is impossible to experience true joy, the inbreaking and indwelling sense of joy that accompanies a deep and meaningful life, a life grounded in Christ, and still feel hate. This is because, as I mentioned last week, hate is grounded in fear. Joy, like love casts out fear.

Nancy Gibbs, the Edward R. Murrow visiting professor at Harvard University School of Government, has said,

Hate, among all our instincts, is the most distinctly human. In animals, violence and venom are tools of survival; in humans, of supremacy. Small, scared people hate; self-hating people hate; bullied and betrayed people hate, as though hate will make them large and safe and strong.

If this is true, and I believe it is, we can note the absence of joy in the lives of people whose mouths spew hate and whose actions incarnate it. How could you possibly be filled with a deep spiritual joy and hate your brother or sister because of his/her race, ethnicity, gender identity, or religious beliefs? It is impossible! Hate cannot coexist with joy any more than it can with hope, peace, love, and an inner spiritual light.

Webster defines joy as “the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying.” I don’t find this definition helpful in understanding the spiritual dimension of joy, because I think that joy is much more than “great delight” or “happiness.”

Think of what the word “joy” means to you. I’m not talking about a definition, because words may not do justice to this experience. Think of several moments in your life when you experienced what you would call joy. Someone else might not classify the feelings of that moment as joy, even if they were to have the exact same experience. But you did! Joy, you see, is intensely personal and subjective.

I believe we experience true joy only when something special breaks into our life. It does not usually come as the fruit of our own labors. It arises as an emotional response to an encounter with God, an encounter with the transcendent dimension of life. This is why the shepherds experienced joy at the birth of the Christ child. The angels burst into their lives and opened them up to the precious gift that was lying in the manger. Joy is what happens when God breaks through our defenses and touches us deeply!

C. S. Lewis spoke of being “surprised by joy.” I think we can be surprised by joy in many ways. We can be touched by joy more often than we think. Joy can actually become a daily experience if we are open to it, if we are receptive. Joy can be a central part of our religious experience, our spiritual encounter with the transcendent.

Just think of the great religious leaders of our time—how they not only share a message of joy; they actually live it! I am thinking of a dialogue between two of my religious heroes,

Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, in *The Book of Joy*. I think of Pope Francis, whom I continue to hold in high regard despite his unenlightened, fumbling, and self-serving response to the problem of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic church throughout the world. However, when Francis speaks of his own personal faith, as he does in *The Joy of the Gospel*, he repeats the word “joy” thirty times in the book’s first four pages.

The ancient Israelites, who were oppressed, looked forward with great anticipation to the joy that would accompany their future deliverance by God. In Isaiah 65:17-19, God says,

*For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.*

The Israelites used the word joy to describe the experience of the new Jerusalem, the final realization of God’s will for them and for humankind. But what if *we* are the new Jerusalem? What if *we* are meant to bring joy to others and to the earth?

The gospel, the good news that Jesus preached and lived was shot through and through with joy! Right from the very beginning, the birth of Jesus gives rise to an outpouring of human and heavenly joy. Jesus’ ministry (Luke 10:17) and his resurrection (Luke 24:52) evoke the same response, the same experience.

Perhaps this is the key to our experience of joy this Christmas season. Perhaps we should not be looking for a feeling of happiness or delight. Those feelings may come to us at various times in our lives, usually evoked by some specific circumstance, but they pass just as quickly. This can’t be what Isaiah meant. Isaiah was talking about a new creation, not only a new heaven but also a new earth, a new creation both in the world and within us. To know that the new Jerusalem is *even now* being created inside us is to experience joy. To know that God is creating new life *inside us* through the Holy Spirit is to experience joy, a joy touched with humility and gratitude.

I don’t think joy needs to be tied to happiness or delight. When we pass the light of our candle to the person sitting next to us on Christmas Eve, when we see our beautiful sanctuary

bathed in the light of those candles and when we join together in the singing of “Silent Night,” aren’t we experiencing a quiet feeling of joy?

Finally, I believe that joy is inextricably linked to sorrow. Webster tells us that the opposite of joy is sorrow. Are they really opposites, or do they contain each other? The joy that Mary experienced at the gift of her child, the birth of her child, must have also been touched by sorrow, sorrow at the gift of myrrh which presaged the premature death of her son. I am not sure sorrow and joy can be separated. The greater our capacity for sorrow, the greater our capacity for joy. Perhaps this is what we experience in the loss of loved ones; that there would be no sorrow if there had not been the experience of joy.

In one of my favorite new television shows, *God Friended Me*, a parishioner who has recently lost his wife asks his pastor, whose wife died several years ago, “Do you ever stop thinking of her; do you ever stop feeling the pain?” The pastor replied, “No--but why would you want to?”

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

In a world that is tinged with darkness and hate; in the midst of the struggles and losses of our own lives, I wish you not a merry, happy, or delightful Christmas, but a Christmas filled with hope, peace, love, light, and a quiet joy.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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