

ADVENT IV-THE ANSWER TO HATE IS LOVE!

(12/23/18)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 13
1 John 4:7-12, 16-21
John 3:16-17

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent. It is also known as Christmas Sunday because it is the last Sunday before Christmas. Each Sunday of Advent we light one of the candles on our Advent wreath and reflect on the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love, the spiritual gift that is symbolized by each candle. We think about not only receiving these precious gifts from God, what the apostle Paul calls the “fruits of the Spirit,” but also how we might share them with each other at Christmas and throughout the year.

This Advent season we have been thinking about the problem of hate. We have noted the dramatic increase in hate crimes in our country and around the world. There seems to be two approaches to the problem of hate.

The first, what we might call the external approach, was clearly articulated in a Boston Globe editorial three weeks ago entitled “When are we going to start taking hate seriously?” The editorial began by referencing local and recent acts of hate:

In Cambridge, a man last month allegedly yelled anti-Semitic slurs at a 66-year-old woman and pushed her against a wall. In Reading, racist graffiti and swastikas have repeatedly appeared in bathroom stalls and benches at Reading Memorial High School. And in Framingham, a 10-year-old Muslim girl recently received a couple of threatening hate letters calling her a terrorist.

We are shocked and saddened by the recent terrorist killing at the Christmas market in the beautiful cathedral square in the center of Strasbourg, France. But these other examples of hate should also shock and sadden us. It is a short step from these cited incidents of hate, especially with the easy availability of guns, both legally and illegally obtained, to the kind of outpouring of hatred that takes innocent life.

As you can imagine, the editorial caught my eye. However, I was less than impressed by the solution that it offered. The editorial bemoaned the lack of coordination between various governmental agencies in keeping an updated data base of terrorist acts. It noted that some cities, like Miami, recorded no hate crimes this past year (which is highly unlikely), and that the

state of Hawaii does not record them at all. It seems to me that better data analysis is about as helpful a solution to hatred as the belief that if we build a wall that is long enough and high enough, we can keep all problems out of our country.

The other approach views the root cause of hatred as internal and takes an internal approach to addressing it. Certain types of people are inclined to become caught up in or possessed by hatred, while others are not. What kinds of people find themselves feeling, verbalizing, and sometimes acting out hate? As Nancy Gibbs has suggested in a recent article entitled “Beyond Hate” in Time magazine,

Hate, among all our base 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.

I don't see how we can solve the problem of hate without addressing its root causes on both an individual and a social level. Our religious faith not only speaks to this issue, it gives us tools to prevent or dissolve hate in ourselves and in others. These tools are the four spiritual gifts that are the center of our worship throughout Advent: the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. These, and these alone, can drive out hate.

This morning we lit the candle of love. The other candles, the other gifts, mean little unless we experience and express that most wondrous gift of all, the gift of love.

In his first letter to the early church, John tells us that “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” The Bible tells us we are made in God's image. If the essence of God is love, then our essence has to be love. Contrary to what contemporary culture would teach us, we are not primarily material beings; we are first and foremost spiritual beings. We are not human beings seeking a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings seeking a human experience.

Love is central to human life. It draws us into relationship with God, and it draws us into relationships with each other. God's love connects earth and heaven, spirit and matter, the temporal and the eternal, this world and the next. It connects people in the most beautiful of ways.

Love begins with acceptance. This is true of God's relationship with us, and it is true of our relationships with each other. Jesus tells us that God accepts and loves us as we are, *as we*

are--even though we are sinners. We don't have to become perfect to be acceptable to God, to be loved by God. We are already accepted and loved! Once we realize this, our lives will be transformed and a more Christian, a more loving life will shine forth.

In his parables, Jesus tells us that God is like a good and loving parent. If God is like a parent that has given birth to creation, then all creation is an expression, an incarnation or manifestation of God's love. If God is like a loving parent that has given birth to human life, then we are *all* God's children. Whether we are Christian or Muslim, believer or atheist, homosexual or heterosexual, criminal or law-abiding citizen, we are all God's children. God loves each and every one of us!

If God accepts and loves us, we should accept and love ourselves. A healthy self-acceptance and self-love is grounded in an honest appraisal of both our strengths and our weaknesses. There are times when we relate to others out of love and compassion, and there are times when we are cold and judgmental. The wonderful feeling of being accepted and loved by God is tempered by the realization of how often we live lives that are less than we can be. As the Zen master told his student, "You are perfect just the way you are, but there's always room for improvement."

If God accepts and loves us, we should accept and love each other. If we are all God's children, then we are all brothers and sisters: red and yellow, black and white. Even Muslim terrorists are our brothers and sisters. We may have to defend ourselves against people who would hurt us, but this does not mean that we cannot try to understand them, have compassion on them, and perhaps even love them. We do not have to hate them! When we hate them, we drop into the same depth of fear that lies behind their hatred. The apostle Paul speaks a word of hope when he tells us that "perfect love casts out fear."

We have a strong ecumenical spirit here in Southborough! It finds expression in our Easter sunrise service and our Lenten series, which traditionally takes place on a rotating basis in each of our churches. During these gatherings, which I hope will resume this year after a brief hiatus, we worship together, share a meal with each other, and participate in a program around some Lenten theme. Our interfaith spirit has begun to find expression in worship services and programs that have been initiated by St. Mark's Episcopal Church. This ecumenical and interfaith spirit is an important part of who we are as a community.

One of the ways we can build or deepen a truly ecumenical or interfaith spirit is to identify and celebrate all we have in common. This was our experience in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group several years ago as we noted the great number of parallel sayings of Jesus and the Buddha. These two spiritual giants quite often not only say the same thing, they say it in much the same words. Once we realize this, how could we maintain that our religious teachings are right, and the teachings of the Buddha are wrong? We can say that our religion, our beliefs, our spirituality are important, meaningful, and valuable to us without having to claim religious superiority or denigrate other people's religious faith.

Love builds a bond between people. It builds bridges, not walls. It is grounded in the realization that if we are all children of God, then we are all brothers and sisters. This is why, when speaking of someone whom we perceive as different from us in some significant way, it would be helpful to refer to them as "our brother" or "our sister."

Think about it. What if we talked about "our brothers and sisters who are Roman Catholic" or "our brothers and sisters who are Muslim?" What if we talked about "our brothers and sisters who are in prison," "our brothers and sisters who are caught up in the ideology of religious fanaticism," "our brothers and sisters who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered," and "our brothers and sisters who are illegal immigrants?" The affirmation that they are our brothers and sisters might lead to empathy, compassion, and even love. At the very least, it would make it more difficult for us to project our shadow onto them, to see them as different, and to judge or even persecute them. It would make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to hate them! Then we could hopefully discover how much we hold in common.

As we lit the candle of love this morning, we were reminded that this gift of love is the greatest of all God's gifts. Love is the great connection. When we are in God, in the kingdom of God, we are in a great field of spiritual energy, the healing energy of love. This energy has the power to transform us, to transform our relationships, and to transform the world. The converse is also true: when we love we place ourselves within the kingdom of God.

Love is not something that we *created*; it is something that we *discovered*. It is something that we *experienced* as a little baby. Somewhere along the line (hopefully) we discovered that we were loved. Then (hopefully) we began to experience and express love toward others. Because it is a gift, even animals can feel empathy, compassion, and love.

Like all the other fruits of the Spirit, we are not meant to simply receive love; we are called to share it. As we heard this morning, John tells us,

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.

The message of Christmas is that God so loved the world that God became flesh, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth that we might see what God's love looks like in human form. Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

As we journey through this Advent season, let us open our hearts to receive the gifts of the Spirit that are offered to us by Christ. We have been given what we need to counter and perhaps even the hate that is spreading across our nation and the world like a dark cloud. We have been given the hope of a better tomorrow—but we need to work to make this a reality. We have been given the gift of peace, the potential for deep inner peace—though this gift often remains unwrapped. We have been given the gift of joy, that joy that breaks into our lives during those moments when we find ourselves touched by God. And we have been given the gift of love—that love that can drive away fear, that can drive away hatred. The gifts are right there waiting for us, not under the tree but under the star. All we have to do is unwrap them and let them live in our lives.

When we incarnate these gifts in our lives, we give birth to the Christ child; he is born in us today! When we share them with a world that desperately needs them, we experience the true meaning of Christmas.

So, hope, peace, joy and love abide, these four. But the greatest of these is love!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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