

The Pastor's Reflection for Nov. 29, 2020

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 130
Romans 5:1-5
Matthew 12:15-21

"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)

I was almost going to say, if we were *really* entering into the season of Advent this Sunday, . . . Then I realized that we really *are* entering into the season of Advent! Just because we are not gathered together in our beautiful sanctuary to celebrate this special day, this special liturgical season, does not mean that we are not in it and that it is not within us, because it is!

Had you come to church today, you would have been welcomed as you entered the narthex by our Greeter. You would have shaken hands or exchanged a hug, and you would have received a bulletin outlining today's order of worship. The front cover of the bulletin would have featured a message or symbol of hope, the theme of the first Sunday of Advent.

As you moved into the sanctuary, if you were an old-time member, you would have greeted old friends seated in their regular seats. If you were a visitor or a new member, you would have been greeted by those seated near you. After you were seated, you would have noted the lit electric candles in each of the side windows. Several years ago, when we were having some electrical work done, we asked the electrician to add outlets under each of the windows so we could light these candles without having to use cumbersome extension cords. You might also notice the garlands along the railing in front of the choir loft and the railing separating the nave of the sanctuary from the chancel.

If your gaze moved up to the chancel, you would have noted the creche on the lectern side. This creche was made and was given to our church by Millie Turenne, a long-time member of this church. On the pulpit side, which is to your left, you would have seen an 8' tall (artificial, but really good) Christmas tree adorned with ornaments and lights. Poinsettias would grace the floor around the altar.

You might not have noticed unless you looked carefully, but the paraments, the cloth hangings on the lectern and pulpit, as well as the stole worn by the minister, are purple, the liturgical color of Advent.

Just in front of the lectern, near the grand piano that was recently donated to us by a friend of the church, your eyes would fall upon the Advent wreath resting on a stand. This wreath of greens is ringed by candles to the four quadrants, three purple and one pink. These candles symbolize the themes of the four Sundays of Advent: Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy. As Bob L'Heureux and I can attest, there is some difference of opinion among the "experts," those who design the Advent bulletins, regarding the order in which the candles are to be lit, specifically whether Love should

come before Joy or the other way around. The fourth Sunday of Advent is also Christmas Sunday. I like to light the pink candle on Christmas Sunday, though not everyone agrees with me in this.

In the center of the wreath is a larger white candle, the Christ Candle, which is lit by the Lighters of the Advent Candle on Christmas Eve. Near the close of the Christmas Eve service, the light from this candle is shared with everyone throughout the church. Then, bathed in the glow of this soft, gentle light, we would have sung, "Silent Night."

I hope I have given you a feeling for what "would have been." However, as we know, "it is what it is," and this year, "what is" is quite different from the way we have always celebrated Advent and Christmas. It is also quite different from the way we want it to be. The sanctuary will be empty this Christmas. There will be no wreath, no creche, no tree, no garlands, no poinsettias. There will be no music, no carols, no Christmas story in word and song. Perhaps this is symbolic of the way things are in our nation and the world as we enter into this blessed season. I hope not. I hope we can find a way to enshrine and honor each of these parts of Advent and Christmas in our hearts.

Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) wrote,

*Of what use, Gabriel, your message to Marie,
Unless you now can bring the same message to me!*

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, the lighters of the Advent Candle would light the first purple candle, the candle of hope. As we light each of the candles in our advent wreath, we reflect on the theme associated with that candle. We unwrap the spiritual gifts of hope, peace, love, and joy that God has given us in Christ that we might experience them and integrate them into our lives. Then we are called to share them with each other and with a world that desperately needs them.

The past few weeks I have noticed that the gambling casinos in our area have increased their advertising. I suspect they know that in a recessionary time like the one we are currently experiencing, a time when (sensible) people are trying to avoid being a part of large crowds in indoor spaces (like gambling casinos), people are more circumspect about the expenditure of disposable income. People are spending less on entertainment, are eating out less often (if at all), are not taking vacations, are not traveling, have decided to hang onto their automobile for a year or two longer, and are vowing to be more sensible when it comes to Christmas shopping.

Placing money in a slot machine with the hope of striking it rich, a hope that is literally and figuratively against all odds, is a luxury that people can afford when they have the money to lose. When you have lost your job, as a million people in our country have, putting your money in a slot machine or matching your poker-playing skills against the dealer's does not sound like a great idea. That is, unless you are a compulsive gambler (gambling addicts always feel it is a good idea), or unless you have a distorted view of hope.

I have never been to Encore Boston Harbor, MGM Springfield, Foxwoods, Mohegan Sun, or even Plainville, which is right down the road, nor do I have any

inclination to do so. Darlene and I aren't the Atlantic City or Las Vegas type; we're much more apt to vacation in Woodstock, Hampton Beach, or on the Cape.

I also don't play the lottery. The rational side of me reminds me that you have to be mathematically challenged to put your hard-earned money on a lottery ticket. Having grown up in a middle-class working family, I have this strange notion that you ought to work for what you have. Last but not least, I'm not convinced that it is morally or even economically beneficial for a town or a state to raise money from gambling.

I do confess, however, to buying a few lottery tickets every time the jackpot exceeds \$200,000,000. I know it's not rational, but when the potential payoff is in the hundreds of millions, I will risk \$5 or \$10 dollars on a few tickets. Actually, I would be interested to know whether, in difficult economic times like ours, the sale of lottery tickets has gone up or down.

Why should the sale of lottery tickets go up--especially when times are tough and every dollar counts? The answer to this question lies in a conversation I had with a woman named Mary in the summer of 1969 when I was a student chaplain participating in a program of clinical pastoral education at Boston City Hospital.

Mary, who worked on the cleaning crew of the hospital, had a regular morning ritual. Long before the Massachusetts State Lottery became a legal staple of suburban life, people in the inner city played the numbers. During the summer months, Mary picked her number by utilizing some combination of the Red Sox box score from the previous day. I thought this was a bad idea right from the start. When I think of the Red Sox' box score, the term "loser" immediately springs to mind. On a feeling level, that's not a great way to approach a game of chance! But that's not the point.

One day I asked Mary how often she played the numbers. She replied that she played a \$2 card every day. I asked her if she had ever won. She said that she had come close on a number of occasions, but she had never won.

"Mary," I said, "do you realize how much money you're throwing away? The odds are stacked against you. If you put the \$2 you gamble every day in the bank, you'd end up with over \$700 at the end of the year. Instead of throwing your money away on a long shot, over time you'd have quite a little nest egg. In ten years, you would have more than \$7,000. That way, you'd be a winner for sure."

Mary looked me in the eye and said, "Reverend Sanderson, two dollars isn't very much to pay for a full day of hope."

This past week, as I recalled my conversation with Mary, it reminded me of the correspondence between the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung and Bill W., one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. In response to a 1960 letter from Bill thanking Jung for his role in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, Jung reiterated what he had shared many years prior with Bill's friend, Roland, one of the other founders of AA.

In his letter, Jung recalled what he had told Roland about the connection between the religious quest for Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, and the consumption of alcoholic spirits. He suggested that the consumption of alcohol might be a misguided search for something legitimate and deeply spiritual, the search for a feeling

of inner peace, a sense of oneness with others and the universe, that warm inner glow that comes from knowing you are a child of God and that your life is special.

Jung said that this is what people should receive from their religious faith. The experience of getting high on drugs or mellow on alcohol is not only a poor substitute for genuine serenity, it is demonic. It will ultimately destroy your body, your mind, your relationships, and everything you love. This is why the recovery program of AA is basically a spiritual process. As Jung told Roland, the only way to heal a misguided search for spirit through alcohol is through a genuine experience of Spirit.

If Jung is correct (and, of course, I think he is), if we need to experience the peace that comes through the Spirit of God within us, we need to find that Spirit through our religious faith, not through drugs or alcohol. What if a similar misguided quest fuels our addiction to gambling? If so, what are we seeking? Mary would tell us that we are seeking is hope. This means that our gambling at Foxwoods or with the lottery is a misguided search for hope.

If this is true, then, as with the use of alcohol and drugs in the search for true serenity, we are searching in the wrong way and we are searching in the wrong places. We are driving to Foxwoods when we should be making our pilgrimage to Bethlehem.

Today, the first Sunday in Advent, we “lit” the first of our (virtual) advent candles-- the candle of hope. Christmas is a time of hope. As we heard in the 130th psalm, people in Jesus’ time, just like people in our time, were in need of hope.

The Israelites of Jesus’ time were oppressed by the Romans, who ruled their country. They were burdened by high taxes, and they experienced a loss of freedom. But they had hope. The hope to which they clung was the hope that a messiah modeled after King David would come to deliver them from bondage.

The people of Jesus’ time knew what they wanted in a messiah. However, what they *wanted* might have been different from what they *needed*. Their hope for a warrior king may have been as misguided as the alcoholic’s hope of finding inner peace through alcohol, or our confusing finding the “treasure hidden in the field” with winning the lottery.

The Israelites of Jesus’ time may have needed something different. They may have needed a king who would reign within their souls, a spiritual presence that would make life beautiful and meaningful and holy even in difficult times. Because of their misguided hope, they didn’t recognize that, in the baby Jesus born in a manger, the true spiritual hope of the world had been realized!

Today, twenty centuries later, we still need to hope. Like Mary, we may believe that if we win the lottery, our lives will be radically transformed. But this is not the way our lives need to be radically transformed. They need to be transformed from within.

God has given us a very special gift in Christmas. God has given us the hope that the Christ child will be born again in us. God has given us the hope that we will become transformed individuals, families, and nations through the realization of the Spirit who dwells both within and among us.

Mary was right: two dollars is not a lot to pay for a full day of hope. In fact, what Mary spent each week on the numbers pool fifty-one years ago, and what many of us spend each week on lottery tickets, is more than many Christians pledge to their church. Mary spent her money in a misguided search for hope, just as we do when we spend our money on scratch tickets. We all need hope, but we need to hope for the right things, and we need to look or search in the right places.

Like the people of Jesus' time, we cry out to God as broken and hurting individuals in a broken and hurting world. We know how it feels to be enslaved by our materialistic lifestyle or by addictions that are nothing but false and misguided efforts to experience a deeper spiritual presence. In the depths of our hearts, we acknowledge that our lives are not what God intends them to be.

We do not have a great track record as individuals or as nations in solving the problems of our world. Yet we hope! This hope is what keeps us working to create the kingdom of God on earth. As Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today."

It is interesting how hope was a central theme in the recent presidential election, and how we fervently hope for the vaccine(s) that will bring this coronavirus pandemic under control. Jonas Salk, who developed the polio vaccine, has said, "Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality." I have a deep respect and gratitude for those who are working to create and then distribute this longed-for vaccine.

The apostle Paul tells us that hope, one of the gifts of faith, will sustain us as we pass through difficult and trying times. He tells the church at Rome,

. . . 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.

The message of Christmas breaks into our lives in the most unexpected ways, in the very midst of our sufferings. It gives us the hope we need not only to endure, but to triumph over the forces of darkness both within us and around us. The Advent candle of hope assures us that we are not alone, that even in the darkest moments of our lives as individuals and nations, God is with us and within us.

There is, however, a danger that attends our experience of hope. Hope can lead us out of the present, which alone is real, into a future that is unreal. Hope can lure us into believing that the peace, the fullness of life that we seek is something that we will hopefully experience in the future, later in this life or perhaps after we die. However, that which we seek is not separated from us by time. It is not to be realized only in the distant future. It is present here and now!

The apostle Paul tells us that the gift has already been given. He says, "God's love has *already* been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given

to us.” The gift is already here! All we have to do is unwrap it. Then we can not only enjoy it, we can share it with others in the true spirit of Christmas.

This is why we light our Advent candles and our Christmas candles, sending our little ray of light into a darkened world. In this Advent season, with all the unrest that besets our divided nation, with the coronavirus danger, and with pandemic fatigue that is exacerbated by our not knowing when “this” is going to end, let us begin our search for true hope, a search that leads us not to Foxwoods, but into the Bethlehem of our souls.

And so, I say to you, be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Persevere. Don't give up. Think of others. Care. Keep the faith. Focus on the broader, the bigger vision. See through the illusion, the delusion of the self-cherishing mind, the thief that takes away our sense of inner peace and that brings suffering to ourselves and others. Trust in God. Don't throw anything precious away. Repair the breaks in your life and in your relationships with gold. Take time to be with nature, to be in nature, to appreciate landscapes. Be socially responsible. Think about what it means to be a real Christian. Learn how to care and not to care; learn how to sit still, to be centered. Face what's wrong with our nation and the world, accept it, and then do everything you can to fix it. You are not working alone. Remove the log from your own eye that you might see your neighbor more clearly, that you might actually be able to help your neighbor remove the speck from his/her eye. Don't be so darned judgmental; it doesn't help anyone, even you. Restore the health to your third eye, your spiritual eye, to your way of seeing. Don't descend into darkness. Always be ready to question, to learn, to grow, to look at your own beliefs critically. Remember that the rituals, the religious celebrations that are denied to us as a community of faith during this period of pandemic restrictions are still alive and powerful, and that they carry their message of healing within our hearts. Remain committed to the bigger, more enlightened vision of who we are and who we can become as individuals and as a nation. Share your time, talent, and treasure with the world. Remember that we live in a world of our own making, and that the way we see the world and life can keep us from discovering the underground spiritual stream that will bless us with abundance, that will fill our hearts to overflowing with gratitude and joy. Remember what Jesus said: “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.” Let hope be born in you this Christmas; then share it with the world. Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul