

The Pastor's Reflection
December 13, 2020

(This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, Ph.D., is posted here in PDF form and can also be accessed in audio form via a link on either the Home page or Sermons page as part of a devotional service on our church website: www.firstcommunitychurch.com)

Scripture Lessons: The Wisdom of Solomon 11:21-12:2
1 John 4:7-21
John 13:34-35

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. It is also a time to prepare for the birth of the Christ child in our hearts.

In this church, during the Advent season, we traditionally reflect on the four themes of hope, peace, love, and joy. We reflect on how these "gifts of Christmas," these gifts from God are transcendent; they come from the realm of the eternal. These gifts were not only incarnated in Jesus, they can be incarnated and shared with the world through us.

Were we in church this morning, at the beginning of our worship service the Lighters of the Advent Candle would have lit the third candle in the Advent wreath, the candle of love. Since we are not in church this morning, we have to light this candle in our imagination; we have to light it within our heart. We do this remembering that the candles we light in our imagination, the candles that God has placed within our heart, are just as real as the candles in our Advent wreath. In fact, they are more real and more important to our spiritual growth.

The first Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of hope. When not only the days but even the times themselves seem enveloped in darkness, it is important to have hope. We hope for an end to international conflict. We hope for an end to terrorism. We hope we will develop the collective will and commitment to stop destroying our environment, to end the unnecessary poverty that crushes the human soul, to eradicate the preventable and untreated diseases that claim so many lives. We desperately long for an end to the coronavirus that has taken the lives of over 1,500,000 people around the world, a number that we know is far short of the real death toll. We hope we will be able to create the kind of world, the kind of human society that God wants us to create.

We also need to have hope as individuals. Depression and despair, which are endemic in our society, are marked by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They pull us back not only from the present, but also the future. They rob us not only of joy in the present moment, but also the conviction that we can create a meaningful and fulfilling life. When the way that lies before us is onerous, when it takes all the courage that we can muster to put one foot in front of another, when we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel, it is hope that keeps us going. As Samuel Becket has said in *The Unnamable*,

*I can't go on.
You must go on.
I'll go on.*

I think most of us, in relation to this pandemic, know what Becket means. Even when we feel we can't go on, when confronted with the demands that life places upon us we realize that if we dig down deep enough, we will find the strength and the hope we need to go on.

However, there is a danger that lurks beneath the golden glow of hope. Hope can pull us out of the reality of the present and transport us into an imaginary future. It can pull us out of that which is real, that which is here and now, and lead us into what is unreal, what has not yet happened. It can seduce us into thinking that some altered state of affairs in the world or in our individual lives would make us happy. This alternative state of affairs then becomes both a necessary and sufficient condition for our happiness.

This way of thinking guarantees not only continued unhappiness in the future, but a lack of joy in the present. We need to face and be realistic about the reality of life in the present, both in our individual lives and in the world. We need to accept this reality, even embrace it. Only when we truly affirm our lives, with its pain and sorrow, with its triumphs and tragedies as a gift from God, will our restlessness be resolved.

The second Sunday of Advent we lit the candle of peace. We not only hope for peace on earth, we deeply long for it. We long for an end to the international conflict that resulted in the loss of over one hundred million lives in the 20th century. We not only hope for inner peace, we deeply long for it. We long for release from the anxieties that beset us, the needless worry that depresses our immune system and steals years from our lives. Anxiety, like depression, robs us of life in the present. It arises from an obsessive desire to control the future. It not only pulls us out of what is real, it gives a negative or pessimistic twist to the imagined or feared future.

We know that any change we would like to bring to pass in the world has to begin with us. We need to *be* the change that we seek in others, in our nation, and in the world. The quantum physicists tell us that who we are and how we feel not only influence our perception of the world, they actually affect or shape the world. They impact the world around us more than we know. If we are at peace within ourselves, if we center or ground our life in the presence of Christ, we can have a profound effect on the outer world.

This truth is illustrated in the Chinese legend of the Rainmaker of Kiaochau. Richard Wilhelm witnessed an example of this legend when he was living in China and working on his translation of the *I Ching*.

According to Wilhelm, there was a great draught in the section of China where he lived. There had not been a drop of rain for months, and the situation was becoming catastrophic. The Catholics made processions, the Protestants offered prayers, and the Chinese burned fireworks to frighten away the demons of the draught. Nothing made the slightest bit of difference. Finally, the local authorities said, "We have to fetch the Rainmaker."

Emissaries from the province were sent to a neighboring province. They returned a few days later accompanied by a wizened little old man. After a short period of walking around and talking with the people of the region where Wilhelm resided, the little old man asked for the use of a hut in the mountains where he secluded himself for three days. On the fourth day, clouds gathered and a torrential rain burst forth.

Wilhelm, who was stunned by what seemed to be more than a coincidence, went to ask the Rainmaker how he did it. In true western fashion, he asked the man to tell

him how he made it rain. The little Chinese man said: "I did not make the rain; I am not responsible."

Wilhelm then asked him what he had done the past three days. The man replied, "I come from another province, another section of the country, a place where things are in order. Here they are out of order; they are not as they should be by the ordinance of heaven. The province is not in Tao, is not centered, and I also am not in the natural order of things because I am in a disordered country. So, I had to meditate for three days until I reestablished my inner order, and then naturally the rain came.

Richard Wilhelm told this story to his friend and colleague C. G. Jung. Jung thought the story was important enough to direct his students to open every meeting of the Wednesday Analytical Psychology Club with its retelling.

The Legend of the Rainmaker suggests that if we are ordered within ourselves, we bring order to the world around us. If we are disordered within ourselves, we bring disorder to our relationships and our surroundings. If we are centered, we bring a centering presence to the world around us. If we are not centered, if we are scattered or anxious, we bring this energy into whatever situation we encounter. If we are at peace within ourselves, we bring this peace to those around us and to the world.

The Legend of the Rainmaker is a teaching about connections. We could not have an effect on nature if we were not deeply connected with nature. But we *are* connected with nature; we are a part of nature. We could not have an effect on those around us if we were not deeply connected with them. But we *are* connected with them, connected on a very deep and profound level.

This insight has been verified both theoretically and experientially in the realm of quantum field theory. Quantum physicists have demonstrated that there is an underlying reality or quantum field, similar to a gravitational field or an electromagnetic field, that underlies and connects all that is. The quantum physicist David Bohm calls this the implicate order as compared to the explicate order. It would be more correct to say that contemporary physicists have rediscovered this truth. For thousands of years, Hindus have known this as Brahman; Buddhists have known it as the creative energy of the Great Emptiness; and Christians have known it as God or the kingdom of heaven.

In the words of one of my favorite Advent hymns, Charles Wesley speaks of this matter of inner peace when he prays,

*Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.*

Wesley suggests that the Jesus for whom we long, the Christ-child whom we invite and welcome into our hearts, has the power to release us from the fears and sins that hold us in bondage. He tells us that we can find our rest, not only in the afterlife but also in this life, when we not only invite him into our lives but actually enter into him.

As the Chinese Myth of the Rainmaker reminds us, we are unlikely to create peace in the world if we are unable to experience peace within ourselves. It all begins with us! If we can create inner peace, the peace that comes from a deep and fulfilling relationship with God through Christ, we can bring peace to those around us. It is just this inner peace, however, that so often eludes our grasp. It eludes our grasp because it cannot be grasped. Like happiness, it is a by-product of right thinking, right feeling, right speech, right action, right beliefs, and right prayer. When we are truly Christ-centered,

the butterfly of peace that we were frantically chasing will come and softly rest upon our shoulder.

The four themes of Advent, hope, peace, love, and joy flow together like the light of the Advent candles. How can we be at peace within ourselves when we fail to accept the reality of our life in the present, when we not only fail to accept it but fail to embrace it? How can we find inner peace when we set up impossible conditions for that peace, when we make it contingent on an altered state of affairs in the outer world or in the circumstances of our lives? True inner peace, the “peace that passes all understanding,” does not depend on some external state of affairs. The apostle Paul lists it as one of the “fruits of the Spirit.” Once we experience that inner peace, we can incarnate it; we can bring it to the world around us. In the true spirit of Christmas, it is something we have to share.

This is the message of Christmas: God is Emmanuel--God with us. Salvation is here and now. The eternal dwells within us. The kingdom of heaven is already spread upon the earth. It is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Today, on the third Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of love. Love is the heart, the soul, the central meaning of Christmas. The Gospel of John tells us that “God so loved the world that he sent his son.” God so loved the world that he became human to dwell among us. Christmas bridges or dissolves the gap between earth and heaven, between the human and the divine, between spirit and matter. It did this not only in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; it does it for us as well.

When Jesus was asked what he considered to be the Great Commandment, that which sums up or supersedes all the laws that are enumerated in scripture, he said that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. Since love is the most intimate of feelings, the strongest of all commitments, Jesus calls us into an intimate personal relationship with God, the kind of relationship that he had with his Father.

How can we love that which we do not know? Obviously, we can't. This is why God chose to become human. As the prologue of the Gospel of John tells us, the Logos, the Word of God was revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus showed us what God looks like in human form. He did this so we can not only know God, but also love God.

Jesus tells us that we need to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. The initiative in this relationship, however, does not lie with us. God has already taken the initiative. Our love of God arises in response to God's love for us. This is the message of Christmas.

Once we realize God's great love for us, God's great love for all God's children, for all God's creatures, we will be moved to not only feel but also express this love in our relationships with each other. Jesus tells us that the first commandment is that we should love God. The second, he tells us, is “like unto it.” We should love our neighbor as ourselves. We should love our neighbor as God loves our neighbor, even when our neighbor is a pariah, as repulsive to us as a Samaritan was to a Jew.

Paul tells his parishioners in the church at Corinth that love is the greatest of all the spiritual gifts. He tells us that love is patient, that it is kind. When we love, our egocentricity, the self-centeredness that leads to arrogance will dissolve. We will not become caught up in grasping, in attachments, in the desire for control over others. We will not even become caught up in the desire to control life. This love, a love not only of our fellow human beings but of the life which God has given us, is strong; it enables us to endure, to bear whatever life brings our way.

Paul tells us that without love we are nothing. This is true not only in relation to our wife or husband, our children or our parents, our relatives or our friends. I think what he says applies to life. If we accept the life that is ours to live, if we embrace it, and if we can come to love it, we will find the peace that passes all understanding. We will also find that we become more loving toward our fellow human beings.

We know how difficult and painful it is for us when we have no hope. We know how difficult and painful it is for us when we cannot find inner peace. We know how lonely life can be when we do not love. As Paul says, we become a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” If we do not have love, we are nothing. Without love, even our good deeds, even our religious observances, bring little benefit to our soul.

The most difficult and painful condition of all, however, is when we cannot love ourselves. If you want to know what hell is like, think about people who have been taught to hate themselves. Of all the problems that people bring to psychotherapy, the worst by far is a feeling of self-hatred, the feeling of self-loathing. This, by the way, has to be taught to the individual. We are not born with that feeling. In fact, it is totally counter to the feeling that God has for us, the great love that led to the incarnation, to the event that we celebrate as Christmas.

I don't know of an efficacious psychotherapeutic response to self-loathing. The only answer to self-loathing is a religious answer. It can only be healed through the belief and then the experience of God's great love for us exactly as we are.

Included in our scripture lessons is a passage from The Wisdom of Solomon. It is part of what is called the deuterocanonical literature, those books or parts of books of the Old Testament that are found in the Greek translation but not in the Hebrew text. These books are accepted as scripture by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions but are rejected by the Reformation churches. Deuterocanonical means secondarily canonical or added later to the canon.

The passage from the Wisdom of Solomon, which is known as the Book of Wisdom in the Roman Catholic Vulgate, addresses the despair of those who are filled with self-hatred, those who are afflicted with self-loathing.

The author, who was probably not Solomon, witnesses to God's great might. He says that in God's sight, the whole world is like a grain of dust that tips the scales like a drop of morning dew falling on the ground. Yet God is merciful. God overlooks our sins “so we can repent.”

Now comes one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. In full awareness of our sin, our brokenness, our humanity, the author, as recorded in The Jerusalem Bible, a 1966 Roman Catholic translation of the Bible, testifies,

*Yes, you love all that exists,
you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence,
for had you hated anything, you would not have formed it.
And how, had you not willed it, could a thing persist,
how be conserved if not called forth by you?
You spare all things because all things are yours, Lord, lover of life,
you whose imperishable spirit is in all.*

How could God create something and not love it? That doesn't make sense! Each of us, black and white, Jew and Gentile, homosexual/heterosexual/bisexual/trans, male and female, Christian and Muslim—all of

us are created by God. God doesn't make mistakes. God also doesn't create junk. If at any time in your life you think you are a mistake, that because you are abhorrent to someone else you must be abhorrent to God, remember this passage and God's great love for you.

Love is the heart of Christmas. Christmas begins with God's love for us, for all of us, for each and every one of us. The incarnation was an expression of this love. God's love calls forth a response in us. Once we realize we are loved by God, once we experience this great love, we are moved to love God in return. Our relationship with God will deepen. Then, consequently and inevitably, we will find ourselves becoming more loving of our neighbor, our brothers and sisters, for we are all children of God.

This Christmas let us celebrate the most wonderful gift of all, the incarnation, the expression of God's decision to become flesh and dwell among us, bringing light and life to all who open their hearts to him. Let us also help to incarnate hope, peace, joy, and love in our lives that we might strengthen their creative presence in the world. Let us remember that since the first Christmas took place in the very humblest of dwellings, it can take place within our hearts.

In 1642, George Weissel wrote a hymn based on Psalm 24 entitled "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates." The words are as follows:

*Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates,
Behold, the King of Glory waits;
The King of Kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here!*

*Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer, and love, and joy.*

*Redeemer, come! I open wide
My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide,
Let me Thy inner presence feel;
Thy grace and love in me reveal.*

In fact, if the birth of Christ does not take place within the portals, within the temples of our heart, and then transform our lives, a thousand Christmases will leave the world unchanged.

May this blessed gift of love enter your heart this Christmas, and through you, may it help to heal a wounded and troubled world.

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. Experience, and then *be* the peace that you can share with others and a world that desperately needs it. Receive the great gift of love, let it change you from within, and then share it with others and with life. Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul