

December 20, 2020 – The Fourth Sunday of Advent
The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, Ph.D. will be posted in written form and also in audio form as part of a devotional service. There is a link to the audio version posted on the home page of our church website: www.firstcommunitychurch.com as well as at the top of this Sermons page.

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

“But the angel said to them [the shepherds], ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.’” (Luke 2:10)

Today is the fourth 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.

Each Sunday of Advent we explore one of the four traditional gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, joy, and love. We think about what it would mean to give birth to these gifts or fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to incarnate them, to bring them into the world of space and time.

Were we in church this morning, the Lighters of the Advent Candle would have relit the three purple candles in the Advent wreath, the candles that symbolize hope, peace, and love; then they would light the fourth candle, the pink candle, the candle that symbolizes the gift of joy. 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.

Were we in church this morning, and were we able to sing hymns out load, we might have sung the 18th century British Christmas carol, *God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen*. I do need to call your attention to where the comma is placed in the title of this carol--after the word “Merry.” The grammar-check on my word processing program keeps insisting that this is wrong. When I place the comma after the word “Gentlemen,” the little warning underline under this word miraculously disappears. But that’s not the point. The point is the words of this beautiful carol.

*God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day;
To save us all from Satan’s power
When we were gone astray.*

And then the chorus:

*O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy;
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

The little red line informs me that my grammar-check apparently does not like the British spelling of Saviour. Also, to be technical, Jesus wasn’t really born on Christmas Day; Christmas Day was established centuries after he was born to celebrate his birth and the mystery of the Incarnation. But, again, that’s not the point.

The theme of our reflection on this, the fourth Sunday of Advent, is joy. Joy, according to the apostle Paul, is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Let me begin by asking you a question. As we approach the celebration of Christmas this year, how many of you are experiencing joy? All who are in touch with this blessed gift of the Holy Spirit, who, in the words of this carol are “dismayed by nothing,” who feel you have really heard and internalized “tidings of comfort and joy,” please raise your hand.

Go ahead, put your hands up. Higher, so I can see them! Don't be bashful.

It is as I thought. As I look out over this august gathering (though you are not really gathered together in one place and/or time as you read this or listen to the audio recording), I don't see many raised hands. And you, the one whose hand is raised, who do you think you are kidding? You're not fooling anybody! I strongly suspect that you either didn't understand the instructions or you are in the middle of a psilocybin trip!

This has been a difficult year. I suspect that the dominant feeling that many of us are experiencing is depression, exhaustion from pandemic fatigue, and anxiety about the future. The shadow of the recent election in our country, which has disclosed the large number of our brothers and sisters who live in an alternate reality, hangs over us and the new administration. Although we are heartened by the beginnings of the distribution of a vaccine that will help us if we contract the coronavirus to avoid experiencing the full-blown and sometimes fatal effects of COVID-19, pandemic statistics still weigh heavy on our hearts. To date, there have been 1,657,000 deaths worldwide from COVID-19; 300,000 in the United States and 11,573 in Massachusetts.

We are deeply troubled by how divided our nation has become, how polarized we are. We are deeply troubled by the feelings of hatred that have been expressed and also acted out toward people based on their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. Over the past four years, something very primitive and regressive within us and within our nation has been released, something that we could actually call demonic. We are not sure whether this needs to be fought or healed. We, at least, know that we have to begin by acknowledging its existence both in the world and also within us.

I find it difficult to be merry when I realize that the destructive effects of climate change are not a future threat but a present reality. The fires in Australia this year have been the worst in its history; this is also true of California. The glaciers in Greenland are receding at an alarming rate. We have lost four trillion tons of ice there since 1992, and the centimeter of global sea rise from this loss means that approximately six million people will be assaulted by increased seasonal floods. I find it difficult to be merry when so many of our young men and women return from combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, a spectrum of physical and psychological wounds, and we fail to manifest the collective resolve to care for them.

I find it difficult to be merry when so many people in our country are homeless, are unemployed, are struggling financially, are having difficulty making ends meet. We shouldn't have people in our country go to bed hungry, and yet we do. We shouldn't have people in our country who are unable to obtain medical care for themselves or their children, and yet over twenty-seven million do. We should be ashamed of ourselves when corporate executives draw obscene salaries while one in ten senior citizens in our country lives under the poverty line, and ten million Americans over age 65 have an annual income of less than \$10,800.

Within the United Church of Christ, the denomination in which I am ordained, some churches hold what they call a "Blue Christmas" worship service. This is in response to the Holiday Syndrome, feelings of sadness and depression that are commonly experienced by those who have lost loved ones in the recent or distant past. These people not only find it difficult to be merry at Christmas; they feel a poignant sorrow. This service is intended to reassure us that it is okay to feel depressed at Christmas when there is an empty chair at the table. If we were to hold a Blue Christmas service this year, I would probably play a recording of the song "It's a Blue, Blue Christmas Without You."

I thought about making a list of those within our church family who might have reason to attend a service like this were we to offer it. Then I realized that a much smaller list would be the names of those who have no reason to attend, those whose celebration of Christmas will not be touched with feelings of sadness. To those of us who *would* have reason to attend, we need to challenge the extra layer of pain that comes when we feel guilty for feeling the way we do, when we feel that there is something wrong with us for not wanting to set up a tree this year, when we carry the extra burden of feeling like a failure because our home and our family does not match the warm and fuzzy Currier & Ives prints. We need to remember that we can't force feelings of joy when none are there. We just have to be where we are, and that's okay.

I confess that the word “joy” isn’t a word that captures my basic feeling response to life (at least I don’t think it does). I don’t know anyone in the world who is happier with his/her life than I am. If someone told me they would pay me a hundred million dollars to do something else with the rest of my life, something other than what I am doing, I wouldn’t be tempted even for a split second. (Well, maybe for a split second, because then I could trade in my 2008 Volvo S80 for a new BMW 750 or a Tesla Model S—which can hit 155 mph and go 315 miles without an electrical recharge. But that’s not the point.) I would describe the feeling that arises from my years of work as a teacher, psychologist, and minister as a feeling of deep satisfaction, the satisfaction of doing what I know I am called to do with my life—learn things and then use what I have learned to help people eliminate suffering and live more meaningful, fulfilling, and deeply spiritual lives. But I wouldn’t describe what I feel as an experience of joy.

Perhaps we need to think about the word “joy.” Webster defines joy as “the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying.” The problem is that when something is beautiful or deeply meaningful to me, I don’t tend to experience “great delight” (perhaps because, in terms of typology, I am a thinking rather than a feeling type). When an experience touches something deep within me, it is more apt to move me to tears. Our communion service often touches me this way. Our Christmas Eve candlelight service always touches me this way. The extinguishing of the candles as we read the story of our Lord’s passion on Maundy Thursday always touches me this way. But is this feeling of deep connection or presence the emotion or the experience of joy?

The word “joy” appears in several different contexts in the Bible. In the Old Testament (Psalms 5:18) it is tied to the happiness derived from married life (as a Marriage & Family Therapist, I will refrain from commenting on that). It is tied to the birth of children (Psalm 113:9), the pleasures of harvest (Deuteronomy 26:1-11), and the joy of feasting (Ecclesiastes 8:15). I know all these experiences except the pleasures of harvest (because I don’t have a garden and don’t want one). Each one has brought me great pleasure (and also, I confess, a little pain). But I’m not sure I would use the word “joy” to describe my feelings in relation to them.

There are also passages about joy in the Old Testament that I find troubling. In Psalm 58:10, those who are righteous are invited to look “with joy” upon acts of divine vengeance. The New Revised Standard Version translation of this psalm reads,

*The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.*

I have to admit that I sometimes experience *Schadenfreude*, a feeling of satisfaction when I discover that justice has been served and that some particular person has received his/her just deserts. I guess I’ve just never been filled with enough hatred to associate the wreaking of divine vengeance on a particular person with anything I would call joy.

The ancient Israelites, probably because of their constant oppression, looked forward with great anticipation to the joy that would accompany their future deliverance by God. In Isaiah 65:17-19, God, speaking to/through Isaiah, 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 ancient Israelites used the word joy to describe their evolution into the “new Jerusalem” for which they longed, the final realization of God’s will for them and for all humankind.

The phrase in this passage that strikes me is “be glad and rejoice in what I am creating.” *Rejoice in what God is creating!* Rejoice in the realization that God is creating something new and special in you; that God is creating something special in the world (even though it may not seem this way right now); and that God is creating something special in the world through you! If you know this is true, you will know the deeper meaning of joy.

True joy is deeper than delight or happiness. To know that God is bringing light to our darkness, healing to our brokenness, and that the Holy Spirit is creating new life out of the chaos in our world is to experience a joy touched with humility and gratitude.

The early Christians believed that the birth of Jesus marked the inbreaking of God's final redemptive act of salvation. This motif finds expression in Luke's gospel where the birth of Jesus gives rise to an outpouring of human and heavenly joy. The angel tells the shepherds, *Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

The joy that the angel proclaims is the joy that comes when we know that the Savior for which we long has incarnated both in the world and in us. When we experience this wondrous miracle of God's love we are touched by a deep joy!

True joy, a joy grounded in the spiritual dimension of life, goes much deeper than 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? This must be the kind of joy that Mary experienced when she said,

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*

This must be the kind of quiet joy that Mary experienced when she took the words of the angels that had been told to her by the shepherds,
*treasured all these words
and pondered them in her heart.*

The psalmist knew this deeper meaning of joy. In the 16th psalm, verse 11, he speaks of the kind of joy that comes when we live our life in the presence of God. He says,
You show me the path of life.

*In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

In your presence there is fullness of joy. The apostle Peter quotes this verse in slightly different words when he reminds his listeners in Jerusalem,
*You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence. (Acts 2:28)*

Finally, I believe joy is, paradoxically, tied to the experience of sorrow, of suffering. Webster tells us that the opposite of joy is sorrow. But are they opposites or do they contain each other? The joy that Mary experienced at the gift of her child must have also been touched by 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 had there not also been the experience of joy.

Another of my favorite hymns, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go," was written by George Matheson. Listen to the words.

*O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O Light that followest all my way, I yield my flickering torch to Thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in Thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.*

*O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to Thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain
And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.*

*O Cross that liftest up my head, I dare not ask to fly from Thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.*

There is a story behind this powerful hymn. George Matheson wrote it in 1882 on the eve of his sister's marriage. His whole family had gone to the wedding and left him alone. Out of his loneliness and spiritual anguish he wrote this hymn.

Years before, Matheson was engaged to be married. When his fiancé learned that he was going blind, she broke off their engagement, telling him that she could not go through life with a blind man. Matheson did go blind while studying for the Christian ministry. However, his sister faithfully stayed with him and took care of him. Now, on the eve of his sister's marriage, he realized that the one who had taken care of him for many years, like his fiancé, was leaving him for another man.

Matheson was a brilliant scholar. If he had not gone blind, he could have been the leader of the Church of Scotland in his day. He wrote a learned work entitled *The Growth of the Spirit of Christianity*, which received mixed reviews. When critics pointed out his mistakes, he was heartbroken. He realized that because of his blindness he could never be the scholar he thought he was called to be. Matheson, with the assistance of his sister, turned to the pastoral ministry where he regularly preached to a congregation of over 1,500 souls. Now that his sister had left him, what was he to do? Who would care for him, a blind man?

It was probably in response to his selfishness in relation to his sister, the anger, depression, and despair that accompanied the narcissistic wound that was opened because she chose to live her own life, that the Lord reached out to him and gave him the words to this hymn, which he wrote in five minutes. Looking back over his life he realized with joy the strength that had emerged from his struggles. He came to see, in his words, that his was "an obstructed life, a circumscribed life, but a life of quenchless hopefulness, a life that has beaten persistently against the cage of circumstance, and which even at the time of abandoned work has not said 'Good night' but rather 'Good morning.'"

It was out of this sense of "quenchless hopefulness" in the midst of a bleak future that he discovered (or was given as a gift from God) what he describes as "the Joy that seekest me through pain," a joy to which he could not close his heart. Out of this experience of joy in the midst of pain came the words, "I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be." (Yes, I'm choking up as I read this.)

I think George Matheson is telling us that even when the skies darken and a dark rain threatens to flood both us and the world, if we look, we can glimpse the rainbow through the rain, the rainbow of hope, the rainbow that is the symbol of God's covenant with us. This experience, which comes through the grace of God and is received through the gift of our faith, brings the kind of joy that is an integral part of the experience of Christmas.

In Galatians 5:22 Paul ties joy to the other fruits of the Spirit. He tells us "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." If we live a life marked by patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and love, no matter what burdens we carry, we will experience the peace that passes all understanding. Joy is the emotion that accompanies our realization, our incarnation of these gifts.

I think the deepest meaning of joy is the feeling that comes when we experience God's presence with us and within us in our daily life. This is the kind of joy that does not leave us, even when, in the words of the 23rd psalm, we "walk through the valley of deep darkness."

Christmas is the assurance that God is here with us and with our world. God brings light to our darkness and healing to our brokenness. How else could we explain all the beautiful and loving things that happen each and every day? And they do! They happen every day in big

ways and in small, and every single one of them helps to incarnate the kingdom of God on earth.

We help to usher in God's kingdom on earth when we stand up to hatred and bigotry, when we defend our brothers and sisters who are the victims of prejudice. We help to usher in God's kingdom when we reach out to those in need in our country and around the world. Every single time we say or do something caring, something loving to each other, we give birth to the Christ child in us and in our world.

In a world tinged with darkness, in the midst of the struggles and losses of our own lives, I wish us not a merry Christmas, but a Christmas filled with hope, peace, love, and a quiet and deeply spiritual joy.

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. Discover the joy that seeks you through pain, the joy that affirms the life that God has given you to live. Above all, don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul