

The Pastor's Reflection

December 27, 2020 – The First Sunday After Christmas

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. will be posted in a written form and also an audio form as part of a devotional service on www.firstcommunitychurch.com.

Scripture Lessons: Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 6:12-16; 9:1-2

“Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” (Lk. 9:1-2)

Every Christmas Eve, when we are able to meet in church for our Service of Lessons and Carols, we hear the Christmas story read to us by several of our church members; we share the light of the Christ candle with each other; and after the warm glow of “Silent Night” has given rise to the proclamation of “Joy to the World,” we listen to a call to engage in the work of Christmas.

The author of this call was the Reverend Howard Thurman, a former chaplain of Boston University. In his Christmas charge to us, Thurman calls us to look past our celebration of the birth of the Christ child to anticipate where this beautiful experience will lead us. His words are a reminder, in the words of Paul Harvey, of “the rest of the story.”

Throughout the Advent season, I try to wrest the inner meaning of Christmas from the commercial excesses of the holiday season. This year has, admittedly, been a little easier since I will not set foot in a restaurant, store, or mall. Always trying to look on the bright side, I have discovered one of the benefits of my decision to abide strictly by the pandemic restrictions--I have managed to go through the entire Advent season without, even once, hearing the Chipmunks “sing” Christmas carols and the Barking Dogs bark out *Jingle Bells*. I swear—if I were captured by “the enemy,” were confined to a prison camp, and my captors wanted to brainwash me, to break me down and reduce me to babbling insanity, all they would have to do is set up an endless loop of Christmas music by the Chipmunks and the Barking Dogs. I would tell them anything—e.g., where Fort Knox is (it is actually in Kentucky), or any other personal or national secrets. To break me down, the Chipmunks and Barking Dogs would work even better than Barry Manilow. But that’s not the point.

Every year I hope that by Christmas Eve, to use the words of the Methodist reformer John Wesley, I will find my heart “strangely warmed.” Every year I enter our Christmas Eve service rushed, trying to make sure everything is in place. I want the service to go well because I know that for many of the people in attendance on Christmas Eve, this is the only shot we will get at them in the coming year (though, admittedly, some do return at Easter and if they need a child to be baptized). This puts a lot of pressure on me to make it an especially meaningful experience *for them*, whether it is or not for me. And yet, in some miraculous way, every year it happens. At some point in the service, I find myself touched by the quiet joy of Christmas.

I usually know when this happens by the effect it has on me. I get choked up or teary. That is how I know I have been touched. It can actually happen several times during our Christmas Eve service. Listening to “O Holy Night,” “Mary, Did You Know,” or singing “Silent Night” as we share the flame of the Christ candle with one another can do it. I can seldom complete a reading of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s poem “Christ Climbed Down” without becoming choked up, particularly the last stanza:

*Christ climbed down
from his bare Tree this year
and softly stole away into
some anonymous Mary’s womb again
where in the darkest night
of everybody’s anonymous soul
He awaits again*

*an unimaginable
and impossibly
Immaculate Conception
the very craziest of
Second Comings*

I assume the bare Tree (which is capitalized) refers to the cross. And also, Rod McKuen's poem, which I have memorized and have recited every Christmas Eve that I have been in this church. The poem, taken from *Seven Psalms for Christmas*, which was published in 1969, the year I was ordained, is entitled "number one/invitation."

*I've seen so many Merry Xmas signs
with Christ squeezed out by laziness
or the printer's economic need.
The outrage that it once produced
has almost found its way into the attic
with nineteen-sixty's broken toys.*

*(Had I not the faces of small children
to mirror Christ to me the whole year long
I might believe God dead, or sleeping anyway.
Though I doubt there lives a Lucifer
who could make September leaves to fall
or set the tails of dogs to wagging.)*

*God is living somewhere in the mountains,
a recluse relegated from some people's hearts.
I bet he'd drop by smiling in the chilly night
and help us celebrate his first son's birthday
if we cared enough to leave the porch light on.*

And it almost always happens during my reading of Howard Thurman's charge to us at the close of the service.

Thurman's charge always jolts me. I would prefer to remain at the manger. I would prefer to bask in the warm glow of "Silent Night." It doesn't seem too much to ask. I want to stay with that feeling of quiet joy; if I stay with it long enough, it just might carry over into the New Year. And it does, perhaps not as much as I would like, but it does.

It is like prayer. When I awaken early and go down into my study to sit quietly and meditate, I hope the experience will carry over into the day. It does, perhaps not as much as I would like, but it does. Most of the time it isn't strong enough to keep me from being self-centered, from grasping, from becoming impatient when things don't go as I wish. But it does make a difference. It shapes the way I interact with others throughout the day.

However, Thurman warns us against becoming attached to the warm glow of Christmas Eve. Everyone loves the baby Jesus. I mean, what is there not to love?! If we can move past the horrendous depictions of him in the paintings of the Middle Ages, where he is depicted as a little man in grown-up clothes or as a king wearing a crown and blessing the Wise Men only a few days after his birth, if we picture him as a tiny, vulnerable baby wrapped in swaddling cloth lying in a manger, wouldn't you just love to hug him and kiss him? Wouldn't you make a place for him in your home and in your heart?

The problem is that this precious birth was not the whole story. It was only the beginning. Thanks partially to the Wise Men's decision not to tell Herod where he could find the child, and Joseph's decision to follow the guidance of his dream and flee with Mary and the child to Egypt, the baby Jesus survived the Slaughter of the Innocents. Then, predictably, the baby Jesus grew up.

When Jesus reemerges around age thirty, he becomes annoying. He confronts the Pharisees on their hypocrisy, the Sadducees on their lack of faith, the scribes on their narrow legalism. He tells the rich that their wealth is holding them back from the kingdom of God. He tells the Jews

that the Samaritans, whom they despise, are their neighbors, and that they need to love the Samaritans as much as they love themselves. He calls people to move outside their comfort zone to become followers of the Way. He calls them forth into a life of sacrifice and commitment. He tells them that a person who puts his/her hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God.

The twelve whom Jesus called to be his closest disciples must have felt special to be chosen. I bet they had a warm feeling, a warm glow within them. Almost immediately, however, Jesus begins to make demands on them. He tells them they will need to leave home and family, the life they have been living, to become disciples of the Way. He chastises them for their lack of faith. He tells them to feed the hungry, to cast out demons, even when these tasks seem utterly impossible to accomplish. He tells them if they are truly his disciples, they will not only have to sacrifice; they will have to suffer. They will have to die.

The message of Christmas is Emanuel—God with us. God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should have eternal life. Jesus is still there for us, closer to us than we are to ourselves. He is knocking on the door of our hearts, seeking to enter our lives. If we open ourselves to his presence, our lives will be transformed.

In the gospels the warm glow of Christmas quickly shades over into what Howard Thurman would call the hard work of Christmas. In the gospel of Mark, this transition happens very quickly because Mark does not begin with the story of Jesus' birth; he begins with Jesus' baptism. Jesus preaches the same message of repentance that was preached by John the Baptist. He tells those he has forgiven to sin no more. He expects that those who have been touched by his healing presence will become healers, that those who have been enlightened by his word will become disciples.

Jesus not only called and taught and challenged the twelve disciples; he is calling and teaching and challenging us. He calls us to move from listeners to believers, from believers to followers, from followers to disciples, from disciples to apostles. He makes the same demands on us that he made on the original twelve. Jesus wants us, his twenty-first century disciples, to do the hard work of bringing about God's realm of peace and justice on earth. He calls us not only to treasure the warm glow of Christmas, but also to do the hard work of Christmas.

What is the work of Christmas, the work to which we are called as individuals and a church in the coming year? We are called to worship together as a community of faith. We are called to listen to the word of God, to let it inform and guide our lives. We are called to deepen our prayer life, our personal relationship with God. We are called to care for this meetinghouse, to be good stewards of that which has been entrusted to us by past generations. We are called to reach out to young people, the next generation of Christians, and both in word and deed help them to encounter that special presence that will give rise to a deepened faith.

What is the work of Christmas, the work to which we are called as individuals and a church in the coming year? We are called to live the kind of lives that Paul describes in his letter to the Colossians. If we are truly disciples of Jesus, Paul tells us, we will be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We will be clothed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

What is the work of Christmas, the work to which we are called as individuals and a church in the coming year? We are called to be a mission church. We are called to reach out to those in need, as we do through our mission support of Straight-Ahead Ministries; the Pastoral Counseling Centers of Massachusetts; Abby's House; The Worcester County Food Bank; World Vision; Heifer International; His Royal Ministry in Haiti; Pathways for Change (The Rape Crisis Center of Central Massachusetts); the American Himalayan Foundation's Stop Girl Trafficking program; our Tibet Fund sponsorship of Tenzin Norzin; the Southborough Food Pantry; and the Salvation Army. When we stop being a mission church, when we no longer reach past ourselves to those in need, we are no longer disciples, and we are no longer the church that Jesus calls us to be.

Thurman would tell us that we are also called to think through some of the complex social issues of our time, to think them through from the perspective of our Christian faith. We are called to root out the sin of prejudice against those who are of a different country of origin, a different color, a different religion, a different gender, or a different sexual orientation, that we might become brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called to affirm women's rights. We are

called to address the complex problem of income inequality and the cycle of poverty that crushes the souls of so many around the world.

Thurman would say that we are called to determine what it would mean to establish both peace and justice in the Middle East and in Africa. We need to make the sacrifices that are necessary to save our world, our planet from the ravages of global warming. We need to think about our response to both foreign and home-grown terrorism, and to claim our own responsibility for creating the conditions that fuel it. I'm not saying there is one Christian position on these issues. All I am saying is that if we are to be the disciples and the church that Jesus calls us to be, we need to witness to the truth of his message in every area of our individual and collective lives.

Howard Thurman reminds us that we must not tarry at the manger, basking in the warm glow of the Christmas story. We must move forth into the work of Christmas, the hard work of Christian discipleship. He tells us that "the rest of the story" is up to us when he says,

*When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release those who are imprisoned,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among the people of the world,
To make music in the heart.*

Let us commit ourselves to this work as individuals and as a Christian church in the year to come.

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. In the year to come, answer God's call to do the "hard work" of Christmas, the hard work of being a follower of Jesus. Above all, don't let the light go out. Pastor Paul