

## ADVENT 4--THE ANSWER TO DARKNESS IS LOVE!

(12/19/2021)

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.” (1Cor.:13)*

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, experiencing what the apostle Paul calls the “fruits of the Spirit,” but also how we might share these gifts with others.

This Advent season we have been thinking about the problems of darkness, fear, and hate. We note 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, the “tough on crime” approach, was articulated in an editorial entitled “When are we going to start taking hate seriously?” The editorial began by listing several recent hate crimes. There was, of course, a plethora of examples from which the writer could draw.

My mind, however, went not to large scale terrorist acts, to mass shootings, but to Danvers, the sleepy little Northshore town where I grew up. The current Danvers High School wrestling season has been cancelled following a racist incident between team members. This comes on the heels of the disclosure of racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic acts, even rituals, by members of the Danvers High School 2019-2020 boys’ varsity hockey team, and the coverup of this long-standing pattern of behavior by the coach, school, police, and town leaders. There have also been two recent discoveries of swastikas painted on bathroom walls in the Holten Richmond Middle School, which I attended as a child. I find it disturbing that these high school and middle school kids are already locked into tribal patterns of prejudice and hatred! And in my own hometown!

We were shocked and saddened at the recent mass murders by a disturbed high school student in Michigan, an assault that has been declared an act of terrorism. But non-lethal examples, like the ones in Danvers, should also shock and sadden us. It is a short step from these expressions of hate, especially with the easy availability of guns, to an outpouring of hatred that takes innocent life.

I was less than impressed, however, by the solution that the editorial offered. It bemoaned the lack of coordination between various governmental agencies in keeping an

updated data base of terrorist acts. It noted that some major cities recorded no hate crimes this past year (it is highly unlikely that there were none), and that several states do not record them at all. While this is regrettable, 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, the internal approach, believes that the internal factors that lead to hatred must be addressed. Certain types of people are inclined to become possessed by hatred, while others are not. What kinds of people find themselves feeling, verbalizing, and sometimes acting out hate? I keep going back to the insights of Nancy Gibbs, who believes that “small, scared people hate; self-hating people hate; bullied and betrayed people hate, as though hate will make them large and safe and strong.” We also note that the vast preponderance of acts of violence and terrorism are carried out by men. What is this all about?

Our hatred, just like our prejudices, says something about us; it says nothing about the individual or the group of people that we hate. It may also say something about our childhood experiences. If we examine the psychological background of hate-filled people, we find a good deal of trauma. The fires of this hatred are stoked by white nationalist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the neo-Nazis, the Proud Boys, and the Oath Keepers, organizations that offer the confused young person or adult the benefit of group membership, an identity, and an ideology. The actor and comedian Henry Rollins has said, “Nothing brings people together more than mutual hatred.” And regarding the hatred of Jews, which is again raising its ugly head, Bari White has said,

*Anti-Semitism is the hatred that never dies. Violence that begins with the Jews never ends with them. All of this is true. What’s also true is that anti-Semitism is the oldest hatred in the world because individual people have sustained it in every generation. It cannot be defeated until we look these people and their ideologies in the face.*

How can we explain the expressions of hatred of students in Danvers High School for Jews and Blacks, the scrawling of swastikas on bathroom walls, gushing praise of Adolf Hitler, and the use of the “n-word” to describe African Americans, describing them as rightfully destined to be the slaves of white Americans? Where do kids pick this up? From their parents? On-line? Are they absorbing it from the systemic racism of our culture?

We cannot solve the problem of hate without addressing its root causes on both an individual and a social level. If we take that mentally disturbed Michigan teenager and either kill him or lock him away for life, it will not solve the problem. Fortunately, our religious faith not only speaks to this issue; it gives us tools to dissolve hate in ourselves and in others! These tools are the 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. As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

This morning Rick Belejack and Alan Towne 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 love is the essence of our being; it is at the very core of our being. 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 way.

Jesus tells us that God is like a loving parent. If God is a parent that has given birth to creation, then all creation is an expression, an incarnation or manifestation of God; it is an incarnation or manifestation of God’s love. This is the understanding of God articulated by the German mystic Meister Eckhart that forms the basis of pantheism, a theological perspective that makes a lot of sense to me.

Love begins with acceptance. Jesus tells us that God accepts and loves us *as we are!* We don’t have to become perfect to be acceptable to God; we are already accepted and loved! 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. Once we realize this, our lives will be transformed and a more Christian, a more loving life will shine forth!

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. We may have to establish healthy boundaries or defend ourselves against people who would hurt us, but this does not mean that we cannot try to understand them, feel compassion for 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 Lenten series, which has traditionally taken place on a rotating basis in each of our churches. During these gatherings, which I hope will resume as soon as we can realistically relax some of the pandemic restrictions that are so important to our health as individuals and as a community, we worship together, share a meal with each other, and participate in a program around some Lenten theme. This ecumenical spirit is an important part of who we are as a community.

One of the ways we can 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 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. When speaking of someone whom we perceive as different from us in some significant way, it might be helpful to refer to the person and think of the person 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 religious fanaticism," "our brothers and sisters who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered," and "our brothers and sisters who are refugees or immigrants?" The affirmation that they are our brothers and sisters would lead us to feel and then express 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 Rick and Alan lit the candle of love this morning, they reminded us that this gift of love is the greatest of all God's gifts. Love is the great connection; it knows no boundaries. Love is love. 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 human beings *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. We had the experience of being 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. There are countless examples of this, beginning with those pets that are members of our family.

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.*

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 heal 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! We need to unwrap these gifts 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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