

ADVENT IV-THE ANSWER TO FEAR IS LOVE!

(12/24/2023)

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.”

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, from experiencing what the apostle Paul calls the “fruits of the Spirit,” but also how we might share them with each other at Christmas and throughout the year.

This Advent season we have been thinking about the problem of fear, the kind of fear that leads to hate, and the kind of anxiety that robs us of joy. We have noted the dramatic increase in hate crimes in our country and around the world, and the reports of increased levels of anxiety in our children. There seems to be two approaches to this problem.

The first, what we might call the external approach, is to try to increase the amount of control we have over other people, other nations, to try to control what is happening in our country and the world. This approach is grounded in the assumption that if only we had more power, more control, we would have less to fear.

I think we know deep down that this is not a solution to either fear or anxiety. First, we will never have enough power over other people, over outer conditions and events to eliminate the causes of fear. Second, if we did have this much power, in using it we would be creating other people and the world in our image, in ways that meet our desires and needs. We are also beginning to learn that the external approach draws us away from true democracy. It leads to fascism—to the glorification and empowerment of someone who declares that he and he alone has the answers, who promises to protect us from the chaos and messiness that comes as life evolves—if only we grant him unlimited power.

By the way, this is one of the reasons why I love our church and the denomination within which I am ordained, the United Church of Christ. Our church polity is grounded in democracy. We trust that the Holy Spirit, working in and through our ordinary, everyday members, not just our ordained clergy or denominational leaders, will help us as a church live and evolve in accordance with God’s will. (By the way, I was just kidding about you being “ordinary and everyday members;” you know that I know how special each and every one of you is!)

The second approach, what we might call the internal approach, is to find, to discover, and then to build a deeper relationship with the wellspring of hope, of peace, of joy, and of love that God has not only promised us; God has already placed within us, within our hearts, within the depths of our souls. God calls us to incarnate these spiritual fruits, these experiences of the transcendent in the world of space and time. I think we might call this internal approach the spiritual approach. It is the approach that Jesus lived, that Jesus taught, and to which Jesus calls us.

Of course, as with any dichotomy, we soon discover that it is not quite that simple. We can't solve the problem of the ubiquitous hate that arises from fear, that is an outer expression of this fear, without addressing the root causes of fear on both an individual and a social level. Our religious faith not only speaks to this issue; it gives us tools to dissolve hate as it arises in ourselves and in others.

This morning Jim and Cheryl lit the candle of love in our Advent wreath. 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 letter to the early church, John tells them (and 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 our essence has to be love! Contrary to what contemporary culture and pseudo-science would tell 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!* And yes, this human experience, both individually and collectively, gets messy at times!

Love is central to human life. When asked what he considered to be the first and greatest commandment, Jesus replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength." Then Jesus adds, "And the second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love draws us into a deeper relationship with God, and it draws us into deeper relationships with each other. God's love connects earth and heaven, matter and spirit, the temporal and the eternal, this world and the next. It connects people in the most beautiful of ways!

Love begins with acceptance. This is really important. Let me repeat it: *love begins with acceptance!* It begins with *radical acceptance!* This is true of God's relationship with us, and it is true in our relationships with each other. Jesus tells us that God accepts and loves us as we are, *as we are*--even though we are sinners! We don't have to become perfect to be acceptable to

God, to be loved by God. We are already accepted and loved—as we are! Once we realize this, our lives will be transformed and a more Christian, a more loving life will shine forth!

In his parables, Jesus tells us that God is like a good and loving parent. If God is like a parent that has given birth and continues to give birth to creation, then all creation is an expression, an incarnation or manifestation of God's love. If God is like a loving parent that has given birth and continues to give birth to human life, then we are *all* God's children. Whether we are Christian or Jew or Muslim or atheist, homosexual or heterosexual, criminal or law-abiding citizen, we are *all* God's children. God loves each and every one of us!

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. It is grounded in our consciousness of what C. G. Jung calls our shadow; in our acceptance of this shadow, in our relationship with it, and our integration of it into our life. Owning our own shadow prevents us from projecting it onto others and judging them for manifesting qualities that are really characteristic of us. As Jesus has said, "First take the beam out of your own eye; then you may see more clearly to help remove the splinter that is in your brother's eye."

We like to think of ourselves as loving. However, if we are blessed with the gift of honest self-reflection, we have to admit that there are times when we relate to others out of love and compassion, and there are times when we are cold and judgmental. The wonderful feeling of being accepted and loved by God is tempered by the realization of how often we live lives that are less than we can be. This (of course!) reminds me of a Zen story.

*The student asks the Zen master, "Do all sentient beings have Buddha-nature."
The master responds, "Yes, all sentient beings have Buddha-nature."*

*The student then says, "So all sentient beings are essentially perfect, just as they are?"
The master responds, "Yes, everything in its essence is perfect—just as it is."*

*The student then says, "So this means that I am perfect—just the way I am."
The master responds, "Yes, you are indeed perfect, just the way you are.
But there's always room for improvement!"*

You can't trick a Zen master!

You are a child of God. You are perfect, just the way you are. However, this doesn't mean you can't grow, that you can't individuate! There is always room for improvement! We can always become ourselves more fully, more authentically. As with Jesus, we can become more transparent to God. When people saw Jesus, they saw through him to God. When people

see us, they don't always see through us to God; sometimes they just see us. We sort of get in the way.

If God accepts and loves us, we should accept and love each other. If we are all God's children, then even people who do not look like us, think like us, or share our political or religious views are our brothers and sisters. This realization does not lead us into a naïve, unrealistic innocence. To be sure, our so-called brothers and sisters in God may attack us verbally or physically, attempt to control us, hurt us, even kill us. We may have to defend ourselves against people who would hurt us, but this does not mean that we cannot try to understand them, have compassion on 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 tells us that "perfect love casts out fear."

This (of course!) reminds me of another Buddhist teaching. Someone once asked the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh how he, an advocate of nonviolence, would respond if his best friend, in a frenzy, were to attack him with a knife. Thich Nhat Hanh said that, of course, he would resist, he would fight back, for not to do so would be to denigrate God's incarnation in him. He would wrestle his friend to the ground and take the knife away from him.

Once he did this, however, he would not use the knife to stab his friend. He would not retaliate because he knows that for his friend to attack him, his friend would have to not be in his right mind. If he were in his right mind, he would never do this! So Thich Nhat Hanh would then try to help his friend get his life back on center, back to his true, his authentic self.

This way of thinking is applicable to our relationships with others, e.g., when people say or do hurtful things to us. It applies to international conflicts, e.g., Israel's response to the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas. Remember, after we defeated Germany and Japan in World War II, what did we do? We helped them rebuild. And now they are two of our strongest allies!

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. This is why, when speaking of someone whom we perceive as different from us in some significant way, it would be helpful to refer to them 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 the Israelis talked about the Palestinians as "our brothers and sisters who are Palestinians," and what if the Palestinians talked about the Israelis as "our brothers and sisters who are Jewish?" What if we talked about "our brothers and sisters who are in prison," "our brothers and sisters who are caught up in the

ideology of religious fanaticism,” “our brothers and sisters who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, nonbinary, or transgendered,” and “our brothers and sisters who are illegal immigrants?” The affirmation that they are our brothers and sisters might lead to empathy, compassion, and even love. At the very least, it would make it more difficult for us to project our shadow onto them, to judge or persecute them. It would make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to hate them! Then, as we discover each other, we can hopefully discover how much we hold in common.

As we lit the candle of love this morning, we were reminded that this gift of love is the greatest of all God’s gifts. Love is the great connection! 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. My best friend Ray, describing the powerful spiritual experiences, visions, and dreams he was having as he approached death, told me, “Paul, I can see it all so clearly now. It is all about love! The whole thing, the whole universe is about love!” This wasn’t a matter of *belief*; Ray could *see* it!

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. Then (hopefully) we began to experience and express love toward others. Because it is a gift that awakens its presence within us, animals can feel empathy, compassion, and love. There are many beautiful stories of how this can happen.

Like all the other fruits of the Spirit, we are not meant to simply receive love; we are also 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.

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 the living 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 entrusted with the light that can drive back the darkness.

We have been given the hope of a better tomorrow—but we need to work to make this hope become 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 the transcendent. 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! All we have to do is unwrap them and let them shine forth 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
The First Community Church of Southborough
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OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

When I was a child, I couldn't wait for Christmas! Even though my parents didn't have a lot of money, I was never disappointed with what I received. Maybe this was good for me. However, my parents did allow my brother, Joe, and me to open one gift on Christmas Eve. It spread the joy of Christmas day out just a little. Too many presents in one morning, just like too much food at a single meal, is just not good for us!

This is what we do in this church. We take the spirit of giving, the spirit of sharing, the spirit of Christmas and spread it throughout the year. Every month we support some charitable organization, some mission, some expression of God's love to people in need in our community, in our state, in our nation, and around the world. As you know, this month our mission offering is sent in support of the Salvation Army.

Let's be sure to do that in the year to come. Let's take the spirit of Christmas, that beautiful experience of Christmas, the spirit of giving, and spread it throughout the year. Let's spread it wherever it is needed. When we do this, we are incarnating the true spirit, the true gift of stewardship!

It is in this spirit, the Christmas spirit, that we dedicate our morning offering, our support of the Salvation Army, and the many gifts we share with our church, with those we love, and with the world. Let us pray: