

December 6, 2009
The Federated Church of Hyannis
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WINTER HARVEST
Philippians 1:3-11

I was one time accused of being a Grinch. It was the beginning of Advent a number of years ago. At the time I was working with a Christian Education Director who was unfailingly pleasant. She was genuinely joyful and always kind and frequently laughing and her laughter and joy were infectious to all about her. One day I was in the church office along with this Christian Education Director and the church secretary and I mentioned the Boston Globe front page articles about some sad and needy people who want help through their Santa Fund.

There was a couple who aren't married but had kids and she could not work because she kept having kids and just got out of rehab and he could not work because he got drunk and drove his Harley into a lamp post and had to give up his career as a chicken plucker and now they want my money to correct the spelling on their tattoos. Maybe I am embellishing that, but I started going on and on about this being the season of whining by people who caused their own problems and all the while the CE Director expressed sympathy for them. Then at some point the church secretary interrupted and said, "I work with Mary Sunshine and the Grinch."

The point is that unlike Paul's attitude toward the church folk in Philippi, love does not always overflow. It can dry up with cynicism and anger and bad experiences. It can be jolted when someone requesting charity is pulling a scam. It can be detailed when those administering a charity make themselves rich in the process. It can get stopped up when we seem to be pouring money down a rat hole and nothing changes. There is something more important than giving toys or other material indulgences.

It is also a gift to help people adjust their expectations to meet their circumstances. I remember as a child the year my father started a new insurance agency. He explained to my sister and me that that meant he would not earn any commission on policies for a year. That year my big present was a sport coat to wear to church, back in the day when kids would dress up for church. That was it. It was not a fun present but I understood

that was the very best my parents could do and I accepted the gift in that spirit.

The joy of Christmas can also be marred by people who are annoying. Maybe you have gotten a Christmas letter like this.

“Dear family and friends,

It has been a wonderful year for all of us. Our youngest grandchild graduated magna cum laude from kindergarten. Our daughter received the Nobel Prize in Physics in October two weeks after giving birth to triplets. As for ourselves, we are blessed with perfect health, flat abdomens and wrinkle-free complexion. And we enjoyed our private audience with the Pope in the spring.”

Our inclination to generosity can be dulled by incessant begging or bragging. It is alleged that Dolly Parton was once asked whether she believed in giving money to homeless people. “I believe in my cosmetics line,” she declared. “There are plenty of charities for the homeless. Isn’t it time somebody helped the homely?” Why not? Why not give the gift of improved self-esteem, the gift of seeing yourself in a more positive way?

Winter is upon us and we are often made ever more aware of human need, and what shall we do? Centuries ago John Wesley, the man who was to become the founder of the Methodist Church, was a student at Lincoln College in Oxford. A porter knocked on Wesley’s door one evening and asked to speak with him. After some conversation Wesley noted the man’s thin coat on a cold winter night. Wesley suggested that he had better get another coat. The porter replied: “This coat is the only coat I have in the world and I thank God for it.”

Wesley asked the man if he had eaten and the porter replied: “I have had nothing today but a draught of spring water and I thank God for that.” Wesley, growing uneasy in the man’s presence, reminded him that he would have to get to his quarters soon or be locked out. “Then what shall you have to thank God for?” Wesley asked. “I will thank him,” replied the porter, “that I have dry stones to lie upon.” Wesley was deeply moved by the man’s sincerity and he said to him, “You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat and no bed to lie on. I cannot see what you have to thank God for.”

The man replied: “I thank God that he has given me life and being, and a heart to love him, and a desire to serve him.” After the man had left with a coat from Wesley’s closet, some money for food and words of appreciation for the witness he had made, Wesley wrote in his Journal: “I shall never forget that porter. He convinced me there is something in religion to which I am a stranger.”

Later Wesley reflected: “One of the greatest evidences of God’s love to those that love him is to send them afflictions, with the grace to bear them. Even in the greatest afflictions, we ought to testify to God that, in receiving them from his hand, we feel pleasure in the midst of pain, from being afflicted by him who loves us, and whom we love.” Even in the winter of our discontent we can be witness to the love of God which warms the cold ground, that satisfies those lacking food and gives embrace to those who are alone.

We know that the true celebration of Christmas should not be deterred by grievances, begging, bragging or anything in our external condition. Yet we can get so excited by what we think we are going to get. Speedy Morris was the basketball coach for many years at LaSalle University. One day he was shaving when his wife told him he was wanted on the phone by *Sports Illustrated*. He got so excited over the prospect of national recognition that he hurried his shave and nicked himself. Not wanting to delay the caller, he ran out of the bathroom, lost his balance, and tumbled down the stairs.

Limping, with blood and lather on his face, he finally got to the phone. Thinking they were calling to arrange an interview he panted, “*Sports Illustrated?*” Imagine his disappointment when the voice on the other end said, “Yes, it is, and for seventy-five cents an issue you can get a year’s subscription...” Disappointment is never easy, but the situation in which Paul found himself was far beyond disappointing. There was nothing in his condition that gave evidence that a harvest was about to break forth. It appeared to be the winter of his despair.

Yet the mood of this passage is one of thanksgiving, joy and confidence, even though Paul was in prison awaiting trial before Roman magistrates for what he said is a “defense...of the gospel.” It reminds me of the man who called his doctor. He said, “Doc, I got my arm broken in three places. What should I do?” The doctor responded, “If I were you I would stay out of

those places.” Paul did not have a choice about the place he was in, but he did have a choice about how he would face his situation.

He said (vs. 8) “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.” Paul urged these church members to press on in love and not to allow the pressures of opposition to sway them. Instead of a litany of despair Paul wrote a letter of joy. Saint Francis of Assisi said: “Let us leave sadness to the devil and his angels. As for us Christians, what can we be but rejoicing and glad.”

We have no choice but to face trials. We do have a choice as to how we face them. Several years ago, a student at Iowa State University took to selling magazine subscriptions for additional income. He determined that a likely customer might be the President of the University. The student was greeted at the door by the President’s wife who was able to resist his sales pitch by saying that her husband already received more magazines than he could read. The student assured her that he understood and turned to leave.

It was then the President’s wife saw something she had not noticed before. The student was crippled. She felt bad that she had turned him down, and probably out of a twinge of guilt called out to him and said, “I did not know you were a cripple.” The student explained that his being a cripple was a result of having polio when he was a child. The woman then said, “My, how being a cripple must color your life.” The young man responded, “It certainly does, but, thank God, I can choose the color!” Paul’s confidence was not simply in the condition in which he found himself but in the promise of what in faith he could overcome.

We know that the harvest is in the fall and we are now marching right into weather, but even in the midst of deepest winter there is opportunity for the harvest of the Gospel, still time to sow and reap the seeds of the spirit, seeds of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness and self-control. Gathered as a community of faith we have the opportunity to share what is essential to life and faith.

Back to the Grinch. If you remember the story, at first the Grinch thought he could deny happiness by taking away all the gifts and decorations and even the food, but he learned those things he took from them were not their source of joy. Even in their lack and loss they found the grace to just enjoy one another. Christmas is not to be ruined by beggars or braggarts. No matter

what our affliction – even in the coldest of winter – we can receive the grace from him we need. Even in the winter of our discontent we can witness to the love of God which warms the cold ground, who satisfies those lacking food and gives embrace to those who are alone.

Paul's testimony is focused on God completing what he began with us, praying for the saints, defending and confirming the Gospel, greater knowledge and insight into our faith, and becoming pure and blameless before the throne of God. It is a harvest out of time with the world but in time with the Kingdom of heaven. The birth of Jesus is unlike our birth. The ways of God are unlike our ways. Praise be to God.

Great God of adventure and Advent, come again to our lives and to our church. Come to us in these days of pain, sorrow and warring. Come to us with new strength and vitality. Help us in these days of expectation and preparation to get ready for the amazing arrival again of the Baby of Bethlehem. Guide us as we move forward to these journeying days and hours of getting ready; in the name of Jesus, born for us long ago and again now. Amen.