



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

November 28, 2010

Welcome to the mystery of Advent

The mystery enters our world this morning. It surprises us, it sounds different, silence has a deep feel to it, as if it were holding something just beyond our sight, just out of our reach. It is a little bit unsettling but exciting. It is the approach of the Incarnation in which God says I want you to know more about me and then awaits our response. As I mentioned last week, this is not ordinary time.

The point of a mystery is to try to solve it. Authors, whether it's Agatha Christie, Dan Brown, or J. K. Rowling, give us clues to follow, some helpful, some red herrings. But unlike mystery writers who want to mislead us and have us marvel at a surprise in the end, God actually wants us to figure things out. God may be the ultimate mystery, but we can still learn how to search and to learn more about this indefinable power. God approves of our efforts to know more and to come closer.

Throughout Advent, I will be talking about some of the ways that we might go about our seeking a deeper knowledge of God. They are called Spiritual Disciplines or Practices and they are particularly appropriate in this season. Richard Foster's classic book *Celebration of Discipline; The Path to Spiritual Growth* is a marvelous primer of thirteen different practices for us on our journey. Discipline in modern culture is often thought of as a constraint, sometimes a punishment, but as Christians, we are invited to know discipline as a gateway to our liberation and new life.

The lessons today provide us with a good occasion to entertain the critical disciplines of prayer and study. We humans are the only species in Creation, that we know of, with the capacity for self-reflection and as we contemplate the mystery of God, we also contemplate who we are in relationship to the divine. Prayer is the primary means by which we open ourselves to God. Prayer as a discipline means that it is to be practiced regularly, even systematically. It is good to pray fervently while you are here on Sunday morning but there are twenty three other hours in each Sunday and six other days of the week. Having regular time for prayer keeps us centered and balanced. The tradition of prayer at regular intervals is still practiced in religious communities with a specific set of prayers every three hours. It is called fixed hour prayer. The Daily Office in our Book of Common Prayer is meant to be used through out the week; Morning Prayer, mid-day prayer, evening prayer and Compline, the last prayers before bedtime. These are not merely prayers of petition in which we ask for something, but prayers that reinforce our relationship with the mighty mystery. Foster says that prayer "ushers us into perpetual communion with God." The more we commit ourselves to this communion, the more we experience God's power in our lives to heal and transform and guide us to new discoveries.

This morning's reading from Isaiah is one of the most passionate prayers for humanity to mature beyond war and violence as the easy answer to conflict. When God is truly in charge, then we will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks because we will have no need of them and we will stop teaching war to our children. How many prayers have been

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prayed since humans first took up sticks and stones and used them against each other? One of my favorites songs is by Jewel and it is called *A Life Uncommon*, she says; lend your voices only to sounds of freedom

*No longer lend your strength to that
which you wish to be free from
Fill you lives with love and bravery
And we shall lead a life uncommon
There are plenty of people who pray for peace
But if praying were enough it would have come to be
Let your words enslave no one and the heavens will hush themselves
To hear out voices ring out clear
with sounds of freedom.*

She's right in that we cannot just pray to God to stop war and then do nothing ourselves to change our warring nature. We can't simply pray, God, please send my son or daughter home safely ... we must pray, God what would you have us do? This is why the spiritual disciplines are so important; their purpose is the replacement of old destructive habits with new life-giving ones. The discipline of study is probably the most critical practice for us here. The apostle Paul says in the letter to the Romans that we are transformed through the renewal of the mind. Such renewal takes awareness and study.

How often have you heard people say, "Oh, there will always be war, it's just our nature." Well, study is the way that we ask "Is it really our nature?" "Do we have to be that way?" One of the people that I have studied to help me understand these questions is a theologian by the name of Walter Wink. He is responsible for one of the most enlightening bits of Jesus scholarship that I have ever heard. You all know the "turn the other cheek" passage. We traditionally have heard it as "stand there and take, be meek and don't fight back." Well Prof. Wink, has pursued the clues and has learned that that's not really what Jesus was saying. First we have to know a little history and sociology of Jesus' time. Israel was an occupied country and the people who were attracted to Jesus message were regularly abused by Roman soldiers and officials. Another clue is that all public gestures were made with the right hand, touching anything, eating, interacting with other people. The left hand was reserved for hygiene related things. Next clue, there were two ways to hit someone, the first is an open hand slap or a good old fashioned, John Wayne sock to the jaw as a fight between equals. Then there is a contemptuous backhand slap reserved for those considered beneath you, a slave, a woman or a child. These are clues that Dr. Wink provides us and then we hear Jesus' teaching in Matthew, "do not resist and evil doer, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer then the other." An important clue is a translation one – the word used for resist actually means "to resist with force" So now we're ready to put our study of the clues into practice. The only way to be hit on the right cheek is to be smacked with that dismissive, "you worthless slave or uppity woman" kind of backhand slap. Jesus told his people to not just take it, but to say "hit me again, but this time, like an equal." He was teaching people how to confront violence with non-violent

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resistance. He continued by saying that if someone asks you to go one mile, you should go a second one. Without study, we might just think he is telling us to be really nice. But this was really another bit of non-violent resistance because Roman soldiers could grab anyone off the street, a shop owner, a rabbi, a community leader, and make them carry their heavy pack, but only for a mile – any further and they would be in trouble with their commanding officer. Jesus said, “don’t give the pack back after a mile – turn the tables on them and make their lives difficult, make them have to chase you down to get the pack back.” Resist their violence and oppression without becoming violent yourselves. Jesus believed that we could learn to do war no more.

This is just one example of the transformed thinking that comes from study. We can study scripture, nature, people and we can study ourselves all in our quest to know God better. God is a mystery but not one that desires to remain unknowable. Welcome to Advent; pray and study and be ready for the God that comes near.