

Meditation

A Christmas Prayer

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense
would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,
the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

I would (if I could)
have for you the gift of courage,
the strength to face the gauntlets
only you can name,
and the firmness in your heart to know
that you (yes, you!) can be a bearer of the quiet dignity
that is the human glorified.

I would (if by my intention I could make it happen)
have for you the gift of connection,
the sense of standing on the hinge of time,
touching past and future
standing with certainty that you (yes, you!)
are the point where it all comes together.

I would (if wishing could make it so)
have for you the gift of community,
a nucleus of love and challenge,
to convince you in your soul
that you (yes, you!) are a source of light
in a world too long believing in the dark.

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense,
would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,
the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

Rev. Maureen Killoran

“What Are We Waiting For?”
A Sermon by Rev. Frieda Gillespie

There is a Chassid Jewish story that goes something like this. A monastery that had once been a thriving and great Order had fallen on hard times. It had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the monks had become a bit psychic and so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot to visit the rabbi to see if he could offer any advice that might save them.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot warmly. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the old abbot and the rabbi wept together. When it was time to leave they embraced each other. The abbot said, “It is wonderful to see you after all these years, but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Is there no advice you can give me?”

“No, I’m sorry,” the rabbi responded, “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery, the monks gathered around to hear what the rabbi had to say. “He couldn’t help,” the abbot told them. “He did say something strange at the end though. He said that one of us is the Messiah. But I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks that followed the monks wondered if there was any truth in what the rabbi had said. Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks? If so, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly he is a holy man. Everyone knows Brother Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety sometimes. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when I look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely he didn’t mean Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. Maybe Philip is the messiah. Of course the rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose he did? O God, not me.

As they contemplate in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance one among them might be the messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Now because the monastery was in a lovely forest along a walking path, people still did visit occasionally. As they did so, without really even being conscious of it, they felt an atmosphere of extraordinary respect that was very appealing. Hardly knowing why they began to come back more often with their families to picnic, to play, to meditate and to talk to the old monks. And then it happened that some of the younger men spent time talking with the monks and before long one by one, they asked to join the monastery and it began to thrive once again.¹

And that's the end of the story.

The season of Advent is a time of anticipation of the return of hope and light for all of humankind through the influence of the redeemer, the Messiah and this is what Jesus as Christ means to Christians. But it wasn't Jesus that the monks in our story needed for renewal. It was a new vision of each other and themselves. Through wonder and then appreciation each monk was able to envision each one in the monastery as the Messiah. Even themselves, although who would want that responsibility?

But do we have any choice? It seems clear to me that psychically, actually, physically and from any other perspective, on a day-to-day level, human beings and how we treat each other have the most power on this earth to heal or to harm the world. If that's the case then no matter what Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Socrates, or Spinoza might say that *could* change us, if we don't take responsibility for the way we are within and with other people, no salvation, no Kingdom of heaven will occur.

Religious scholar Huston Smith points out that what is unique about Christ Jesus is not that he was understood as being God by Christians, lots of ancient rulers declared themselves to be gods in their day. What was unique was that this God-man was very decidedly human. That was the radical notion. He was born to a woman, suffered and struggled and bled and died as a human being would.²

Everything Jesus taught was about human responsibility. When he healed someone, he said, "Go, and sin no more." Or, "your faith has made you whole." He said things like, "if your right hand offends you, cut it off." He was all about being aware of how we are inside and how we relate to others. He was not about divine intervention. He was about awakening to the divine within us. He called upon his followers to understand him and be *like* him. His teaching was about how we think and how we are in our lives.

¹ Kornfield, Jack, *Soul Food* San Francisco: Harper, 1996, pp 12-14.

² Smith, Huston, *The Illustrated World's Religions: A Guide to our Wisdom Traditions* San Francisco: 1991.

The judgment day for us is every single day. The world is as it is each day for people, because of the way we treat each other and ourselves. We can blame someone else for acting badly. We can say it's those people across the sea. But we cannot change the fact of our inexorably woven fate in the tapestry of all humankind. This has always been true. And it is clearer to us the smaller the world becomes and the more visibility we have to other peoples and cultures.

So, in a very real way perhaps we are each the Messiah. We each have our strands in the larger cloth of humanity. And those individual strands weave far and wide touching so many other people's, who touch others, who touch others. The spiritual health of humanity depends upon the spiritual health of each of us as individuals, just as a cloth depends on the integrity of each of its threads. It is always and ever that way. When we treat another with violence—violent words, or actions--that violence reverberates through the entire world. Likewise, when we treat each other with love, that love traverses the network far from its original source.

Perhaps you've all heard by now about the tragic murders and suicide in Clearwater, Fl. An entire family, members of the Unitarian Universalist church there, were killed by the ex-husband and father of the two children, who then killed himself. Last June at Father's Day he gave a sermon pleading with the congregation to help him overcome the violent feelings and thoughts he experienced. I mention this because our prayers and thoughts would help this grieving congregation. Empathy shared, even from strangers, at a time like this brings hope and strength to people who are laden with sadness, guilt, and horror. This church has a relationship through their minister with a Unitarian church in the Kashi Hills of India. Their minister, Rev. Janamanchi was there on sabbatical when this happened. The members of that church all sent their deepest condolences to the congregation in Clearwater. Already these actions have far reaching effects.

Probably as long as we've inhabited this planet people have longed for a way to avoid bearing the burden of responsibility for the well-being of our human family. We've ascribed it to God, a God or Gods. We've handed it to chance or fate; we've blamed this or that group.

I wonder what would be different if, instead of looking to others to make the world right, we each felt it was on our shoulders for our tiny but far-reaching part. If every time we spoke we watched to see if we were adding to or relieving the violence in the world. If every time we spoke, we noticed what tone, what message we were sending into the collective consciousness of human beings. Do we send out love or do we send out mistrust, fear, hatred, superiority, inferiority, callousness, passivity, indifference, jealousy, envy, possessiveness? Do we send out self-righteousness or compassion? Do we send out wonder and appreciation or disdain? Do we send out our light or darkness? If it's our darkness do we add the stars and moon or send only despair?

Equally important it seems to me is how we receive the transmissions from everyone else. What are we sensitive to, and what do we do with it? Do we reactively send back what we receive? Do we even receive what's sent or do we react first just in case it's

something bad that we'll need to deflect. In this way do we block our hearts from receiving the many, many blessings that are being sent our way? Krishnamurti once said that one of the worst things you can do to another person is to be hurt by them. What a radical notion that is! Do we allow ourselves to risk being vulnerable and real or do we cloak ourselves in politeness, polish, and propriety?

So what if we noticed all of this and more. Would we then start to send out compassion for ourselves for being so human and vulnerable to reactivity? Would we send out prayers for new life? Would we venture a little more to pay attention to what comes to us that gives us joy? Would we begin to have the strength then to receive harshness from another and yet be able to wonder about and appreciate them nevertheless? If we noticed all of this wouldn't we become so much more careful about what we send into the network of connections with this entire world?

I suspect we can all think of a person or persons in our lives that made a big difference to us without their ever knowing it. I remember my 10th grade English teacher as one such person. At a time in my life when I felt very alone and depressed, she treated me with respect in a way that fed my sense of possibilities. I don't remember her name, but I'll always remember how I felt in response to her. We cannot know the many ways we might have affected others with a smile, an idea, an affirmation of their strength or potential, some comfort at just the right time. We will never know, but nonetheless those effects reverberate into the lives affected and the ones they affect and so on and so on.

A babe is born in Bethlehem and the weary world rejoices. Babies are born every second of every day and each of them holds the same promise of hope and light. Each of them will influence their present and the world's future. In the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs, "No angels herald their beginnings, no prophets predict their future courses, no wisemen see a star to show where to find the babe that will save humankind. Yet each night a child is born is a holy night, fathers and mothers—sitting beside their children's cribs feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning."

Anyone who has suffered feels the way hope and the promise of life seems to dim with the burdens of loss and brokenness. Our childhood sense of immortality and our youthful sense of invincibility give way to the realities of finite abilities and death. Each baby born renews our sense of possibilities. Jesus came into the world to bring the message that we need only seek it and a life rich with spiritual possibilities is waiting for us. It is our cynicism, our defenses, our mistrust, and all the ways we try to squelch our inner sorrows that keep us from seeing the truth of it. We have set aside this time each year to rekindle our belief in the possibilities within us and in the world.

There is no greater reason to hope than the power and beauty of creation including each of us. I had the pleasure of hearing Jane Goodall speak in person once. For those of you who don't know, she is a famous animal biologist, preservationist and much more, who studies and protects Chimpanzees who every year are closer to extinction due to poaching. The poaching came about because of the displacement of native people from their sources of food. Jane Goodall has been a hero of mine since I was a teenager. I was

a little dismayed to see at this lecture how many women my age felt the same way about her. I thought she was mine alone. She had just published her book, Reason for Hope and so, someone asked her why she feels hope for chimpanzees and other wildlife that are vanishing so quickly. I remember her saying that one of the primary reasons is her faith in the human mind. That our capacity to reason and innovate is so very powerful that we can find solutions to the human problems that create the environmental mess we've gotten ourselves into. She added that she feels hope because of the young people she meets that understand the issues and are so willing to give their time and energy to planetary healing.

Above all else we must notice what atmosphere we create for our children in our homes and schools and churches. What are we teaching by how we treat ourselves, our partner or extended family, strangers, and how we treat them?

World peace is only possible when enough people feel peaceful, are fed, are clothed and sheltered, are relieved of physical harm from others. World peace is only possible when enough people feel loved and appreciated. When enough people are willing to share power because they really appreciate what others can do. When enough people are willing to talk through differences and disagreements. When enough people are willing to share the wealth we cling to out of fear. When enough people see how significant they are in the greater scheme of things, and when they see and appreciate the qualities in everyone they meet that might indicate that they are the one come to teach us, and lift us from our sick beds, and command us to walk. The good news about all of this is that every step we take in this direction gives us more joy and freedom in our lives.

May it be so for all of us this Advent and throughout the year.

Closing Hymn: #237 The First Nowell

Benediction

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 the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring justice among [all],
 To make music in the heart.
 --Howard Thurman