

December 8, 2019 Peaceful Joy

Dr. Seuss wrote a charming little story of a malcontent named the Grinch. This foul, green, slimy, grouchy character had no room in his heart for Christmas. Every year he worked himself into a rage because the Who's, the little people that lived in Whoville, celebrated Christmas with a passion. They decorated, they celebrated with feasts, they exchanged gifts and sang songs – and this really rankled the Grinch. And so the Grinch devised a plan. He thought to himself that if he could just steal the decorations, the gifts and the feasts – he could steal Christmas. And the Who's would have nothing to celebrate. And so he executes his evil plan. He cleans out the village so that there is not even enough of the feast left to feed a mouse.

As Christmas Day arrives the Grinch is perched on top of a craggy peak, ready to throw all of the Christmas loot he's stolen from the Who's over the edge. He pauses for just a second, hoping to hear a wailing and whimpering from Whoville down below. But instead, the Who's gather and sing – just like they always had. And when the Grinch hears the Who's singing, he finally realizes that Christmas is not about the gifts and the feasts and the decorations – but that there is something greater and bigger

– something that cannot be squelched or muted by the foulness or sliminess or grouchiness of this world. There is a peaceful joy that we celebrate today.

I want to share another story: A few days before Christmas two men in Florida decided to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. While they were out sailing a terrible storm arose. It was all they could do to keep their boat under control. As they maneuvered their way back to land, their boat became grounded on a sandbar. They had to jump overboard and push with all their might trying to get the boat into deeper water. While they were doing this, the wind was blowing, the waves were rushing upon them and they were soaking wet, knee deep in mud. One of the guys looked at his buddy and said, “You know, it sure beats Christmas shopping though.”

So often we become so accustomed to our life being filled with the stresses and turmoil of daily life that we think it is normal. We just get used to it. We COPE. We have long forgotten what peace looks like and don't recognize it when we see it. Listen closely to what people talk about, and you will find that the stresses and turmoil of our times has robbed people – even Christians – of their peace. At this Advent season we can reflect on

where we are and come back to the Restorer of our peace. We can always come back to our faith in God, our relationship with the coming of Christ, and find joy in the in the peace of those relationships and supportive compassion.

Seems my sermon today is best expressed by sharing anecdote after anecdote, so I offer another story about peaceful joy, my last one. Years ago, there was a very wealthy man who, with his devoted young son shared a passion for art collecting. Together they traveled around the world, adding only the finest art treasures to their collection. The widowed elder man looked on with satisfaction as his only child became an experienced art collector. The son's trained eye and sharp business mind caused his father to beam with pride as they dealt with art collectors around the world.

As winter approached, war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His beloved son was missing in action. Within days, his fears were confirmed. The young man had died while rushing a fellow soldier to a medic. Distraught and lonely, the old man faced the upcoming Christmas

holidays with anguish and sadness. The joy of the season would visit his house no longer.

On Christmas morning, a knock on the door awakened the depressed old man. As he opened the door, he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hand. He introduced himself by saying, "I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you."

As the two began to talk, the soldier told of how the man's son had told everyone of his love of fine art. "I'm an artist," said the soldier, "and I want to give you this." As the old man unwrapped the package, the paper gave way to reveal a portrait of the man's son. Though the world would never consider it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man's face in striking detail. Overcome with emotion, the man thanked the soldier, promising to hang the picture above the fireplace which he did, pushing aside thousands of dollars of other paintings.

During the days and weeks that followed, the man realized that even though his son was no longer with him, the boy's life would live on because of those he had touched. The painting of his son soon became his most

prized possession. He told his neighbours it was the greatest gift he had ever received.

The following spring, the old man became ill and passed away. The art world was in anticipation. With the collector's passing, and his only son dead, those paintings would be sold at an auction. According to the old man's will, all of the art works would be auctioned on Christmas day, the day he had received his greatest gift.

Peace, or inner peace of our souls is what I think is the epitome of chaos, stress and worry. Earl Nightingale said, that 40 percent of the things you worry about will never occur anyway. 30 percent of the things you worry about are the things in the past that can't be changed by all the worry in the world. 12 percent of the worries are needless worries about our health. 10 percent of them are petty, miscellaneous worries. Only 8 percent are real and legitimate worries. So, 92% of your worries are pure fog with no substance at all. So let's learn and practice the art of finding, and even embracing peaceful moments of joy, or joyful moment of peace, and prepare our souls for the coming of Christ, the reason for the season.

How can we take a deep breath and, like Joseph, open to discover what may be an unexpected gift in the midst of a difficult situation? What

will help us choose peace and serenity instead of joining chaos when we encounter it? How are we contributing to chaos instead of the reign of truth and grace? Who in your life or community needs a “kiss” of peaceful joy and the spirit of Christ?

We don't often think about joy as “peaceful.” We think of it as exuberant and somewhat “happy-clappy.” It certainly can be. But this advent we are focusing on joy every week at a deeper level. And I think we are now aware of the power of the joy that resides like an always-flowing river of grace and presence of God that we can dip into when we need it most. Peaceful joy says “stick with it, beloved, it will be alright” even when it doesn't feel completely right, right now. Peaceful joy says to us, “it doesn't have to be this way.” We can shift from joining the chaos to being in the quiet eye of the storm where Emmanuel, “God With Us,” has set up residence. And we can be “Emmanuel” for each other when the storms threaten to overtake the people, community, creation around us. So once more, people, let's practice our peaceful joy. Amen.

