

Sunday December 15th, 2024

Advent III

Philippians 4:4-7

“Moving In.”

Two friends were talking one day at the local coffee shop, and one said, “You sure seem unhappy.” His friend replied, “Yep. Living with my mother-in-law is stressful. She’s constantly fussing at both me and my wife.” “Well, if worse comes to worst, you may have to ask her to move out.” suggested the first man. “I don’t think we can do that.” countered the other man. “Why’s that?” “Well, it’s her house.”

Here’s a great question. When all things are considered, when it comes to our homes, are we the ones being influenced by our homes, or are we influencing our home? And I am not talking about the building itself, but rather the relationships that make up a home environment. Perhaps you would like to argue, and I believe there is some truth to the idea, that maybe it’s a bit of both; with influence moving between ourselves and our families.

I guess I am kind of treading close to the age-old debate of nature verses nurture here. You know the debate where people try to decide who we are, and who we become as people, is determined more by our biological makeup, or the environment we grew up in. Once again, I think we can safely assume it’s probably a little of both.

The point is that our homes, whether the one we grew up in, or the one in which we reside now, have had a profound impact upon us and we are influenced by it. Many of our: ideas, traditions, philosophies and largely our world views have all been shaped by the parents and siblings, spouses and children we have rubbed shoulders with. It could be something as simple as how you cook a certain food, to a more serious effect in how we view other cultures and religions, or the values we hold.

To see how profoundly you have been affected by your home life, just ask yourself if your political leanings are your own, or because mom and dad voted that way. Am I a Baptist because of personal conviction, or because my family has always been Baptist? How many of my life choices are made because I have examined all sides of the issue and made an informed decision, and how many are made from habit.

One of the hardest adjustments we ever must make is when we first get married, or even when we get a roommate who is not an immediate family member. Even simple things like how you load the dishwasher can lead to some harsh words. Not to mention discussions about whose family is fortunate enough to be graced with the presence of the young couple at Christmas. I remember in our early years of marriage, Laura and I often attended up to four different family Christmas gatherings to connect with everyone.

A lot of pre-marital counseling, and even marital counseling, has to do with working through differing approaches to money management, child rearing, and coping with the in-laws. I ran across a funny story about a young couple getting married. The young man was very concerned because he had a real problem with severe foot odour. His father calmed his fears by suggesting he wear socks to bed to mask the odour.

Sunday December 15th, 2024

Advent III

Meanwhile the young bride-to-be was anxious because she had very bad morning breath and thought such a discovery by her new husband could torpedo the new marriage. Her mother told her not to worry and that when she first woke up, she should go immediately to the bathroom and brush her teeth before returning to bed to greet her husband. Well, the advice that was given proved very successful until one fateful morning.

The man awoke and discovered to his horror that his badly needed socks were no longer on his feet. Scrambling around in bed looking for the lost socks, his wife awoke and without thinking turned to him and asked what was wrong, to which the young man exclaimed, “Good heavens dear, I think you’ve swallowed one of my socks.” Ah, the fun and foibles of living in a family environment.

So, it is perhaps, knowing from experience the struggles to coexist with others in the intimacy of a family unit, we approach Jesus with great trepidation; because Paul says Jesus is the one in which we dwell. Christ is to be our home, and we are to be, of course, the family that resides in said home. The question needs to be asked, am I going to let my home with Christ influence me, or am I going to insist that I influence Christ?

Am I going to allow my overwhelming human nature to be subjugated to the nurturing of Christ? One of the unique things about Jesus’ birth is that when a baby is born, the newborn becomes part of a family. The baby really has no choice, even if the child is placed for adoption. With Jesus’ birth, it is we who are joining a family, but unlike most babies we have a choice. We can be grateful for what Christ has done, and accept our adoption, or we can resist the adoption and try to opt out

There is, however, something else we perhaps forget in our celebrations of Jesus’ birth. Normally a baby takes on the characteristics of its family. We talk about family resemblance. We notice that someone behaves like their parents or picks up a parent’s mannerisms. For example: a few years ago, when my parents came for Josh’s birthday, Laura took them to Sheridan Nurseries where she worked to see the Christmas displays.

One of Laura’s co-workers, who happened to know me, took one look at my mother and exclaimed, “I know whose mother she is”. This is a more flattering experience than my father had some years back when he attended a social event in Hamilton. A woman came up to him and said, “You must be Shirley Weir’s son”, using my grandmother’s maiden name. My father didn’t know this woman and was surprised by the correct assumption.

When he queried as to how she knew the connection, the woman replied that his big nose was a sure give away. My grandmother was not amused. The baby Jesus, however, calls us to take up a resemblance to him; to behave and appear as the incarnation of our Lord. Paul mentions some of the things we should look for in our resemblance to Christ. Paul talks about “fullness of joy, being considerate of others, not worrying, praying about everything, having a peace that will guard our hearts.”

Paul also states beautifully that those of Jesus’ family are to focus on thoughts that are: true, honourable and right.

Sunday December 15th, 2024

Advent III

As Jesus' family, we are to think about things that are: pure, lovely, admirable and things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Now, let me be very clear here; this is not about the power of positive thinking ala Norman Vincent Peale, but it refers to something much deeper than a mere act of willing ourselves to think glad tidings. I mention this because there is an unholy trend to dismiss negative human experiences to simply appear spiritual.

In Newsweek Magazine, Eric Wilson, a professor of English at Wake Forest University, talks about his desire to become a happier person. He at least wanted a smile on his face, rather than the scowl people were used to seeing. When they got wind of his efforts, Wilson's friends urged him on to a sunny disposition. Wilson states that he: bought books on how to become happy, and he watched uplifting movies, and inserted the words "Great" and "Wonderful" into his conversations.

But none of these helped. Turning against what he calls "the happiness movement" he wrote his book *Against Happiness*. Wilson believes Americans, and I think we can include we Canadians in his assumptions, are fixated on happiness-to the extent of even fostering "a craven disregard" for whatever shows a mere hint of melancholy. On a side note, I remembered a scene from the Monty Python movie "Life of Brian".

I know a lot of people find it sacrilegious, but setting that aside for just a moment I want to remind those who have seen it of a scene at the end of the movie where Brian (the pseudo-Christlike figure) has been nailed to the cross and is quite despondent; as I am sure any of us would be. The movie then portrays a neighbouring man on a cross trying to encourage Brian by telling him to "look on the bright side of life". At which point, all the condemned persons on crosses on the movie screen break into a song about "looking on the bright side of life."

The ludicrous idea of dying on a cross, and looking on the bright side of life, is the point of the scene, and was obviously an attempt by the film's creators to poke a hole in a life's philosophy that sees power in positive thinking no matter what the circumstance. The happiness movement that Wilson refers to bloomed in the 1990's and was motivated by scientific studies on the brain and the rise of "positive psychology".

Wilson points out that recently there is a backlash against a philosophy that says, "normal sadness is something to be smothered, even shunned." Further study has discovered that "being happier is not always better." Those who know some discontent are motivated to improve their lot in life and the condition of their community. Ed Diener, who wrote a similar work to Wilson's, puts forth the following idea.

"If you're totally satisfied with your life and with how things are going in the world, you don't feel motivated to work for change." He goes on to say that when you experience a negative mood, "you become more analytical, more critical, and more innovative. You need negative emotions, including sadness, to direct your thinking." All of this seems to echo something Solomon wrote long ago: "there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance."

Sunday December 15th, 2024

Advent III

Jesus even said that those who mourn will be blessed. As a friend of mine likes to say, “I just can’t be as happy as Joel Osteen”. He is referring of course to the very chipper Christian evangelist with the big smile. Our joy at this Christmas season must go much deeper than mere happiness. In fact, although I never would claim to know the mind of God, I wonder if it was a sense of unhappiness with our world that motivated God to send Christ. If God had been happy with everything happening in the world, would Jesus have been sent to us?

Consider if you will, that this whole Christmas season is about not only God’s discontent with this world, but humanity’s discontent as well. Mary sings about it in the Magnificat. “His mighty arm does tremendous things! How he scatters the proud and haughty ones! He has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty handed.”

Does this sound like someone who’s happy with the way things are? Jesus whole life and ministry were predicated on a holy discontent with the injustice, inequality and complete darkness that surrounded people. God calls us as Jesus’ family not to be happy but to be joyful. Christmas celebrates the beginning of God taking charge in a new way to bring hope where none existed before.

I know that such sentiments sound good but perhaps we’ve become cynical. Life has just beaten us down too much. Cynicism kills the soul like frostbite, creating a deadening numbness. Callousness and doubt numb us to life and joy. As declared Christians, we find ourselves Sunday after Sunday leaving the triumphant lyrics of the old hymns on the church doorstep. We do so because the words of hymns seem so out of step with the world waiting outside.

Our problem is not that we’ve been taught to question our faith, but rather that we’ve been taught to reject any answers. Doubt can be a state of mind, or it can be a way of life. (Scott Sernau, *Please Don’t Squeeze the Christian*, p. 109) What are we representing to the world? Is there nothing more to our Christmas celebrations than simple traditions? Where is the hope in our hearts, and the joy in our souls that sustains us even when we aren’t happy?

It’s not about taking control of our destinies or tricking our spirits into being falsely happy all the time. It’s about becoming part of the grand adventure that Christ invites us to join. As Frederick Buechner writes, “In our world, the temptation is always to go where the world takes us; to drift with whatever current happens to be running strongest. When good things happen, we rise to heaven.

When bad things happen, we descend to hell. I know this to be true of no one as well as I know it to be true of myself. I know how just the weather can affect my whole state of mind for good or for ill. How just getting stuck in a traffic jam can ruin an afternoon that in every other way is so beautiful that it dazzles the heart. We are in constant danger of being not actors in a drama of our own lives but reactors.” (*The Longing for Home*, p.109)

Sunday December 15th, 2024
Advent III

Can we be actors and be at peace with God being our director. Think about the Christmas story again.

We are told in the bible that a decree went out from the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus that everyone in Judea should be counted. I am sure that the people of Judea were not thrilled with this call to drag themselves to their place of origin and be counted. If we had been there, our worldly minds would have fumed about the inconvenience, we would have gossiped about the hidden motives and screamed in frustration over how powerless we are in the face of such authority.

For that is how we look at things we do not like, that inconvenience us. What if though, as Jesus' family, we saw things differently? Micah 5:2 reads, "But you, O Bethlehem ... from you shall come forth for me/one who will rule in Israel." Augustus' decree went out in God's perfect timing and in accordance with God's perfect plan to bring his Son into the world. What if we saw life's disappointments as God's timing and his moving?

What if, like Mary and Joseph, whose best laid plans for a life together were turned upside down, we saw our setbacks as God's course corrections. Can we reflect on our rollercoaster lives and with confidence say we are full of joy because God is at work in our lives? The reward of such confidence is the peace of God that Paul says will be with us, no matter what may befall us.

Today is the day of invitation where God in Christ has come to dwell with us and to invite us to dwell with Him. If you feel you are outside of God's grace or in a place of discouragement that is overwhelming you, maybe it's time to move. It is time to move in with Jesus' family and let him influence you in ways you can never imagine.