

“There’s Really Nothing Else”

Rev. David Gregory

December 20, 2020

Advent 4



Readings

Psalm 89:1-2, New Revised Standard Version

I will sing of your great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

Mother Teresa *in A Simple Path*

We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.

We are experiencing auspicious moments, full of endings and new beginnings, and we’re finding out every single time we gather just how important it is for us to stay in community. You may be living in a bubble with a loved one or perhaps with a group of family members, and your holiday observances will no doubt be more muted than in times past. This will bring you unique joys and disappointments, and we are here to experience them with you. We also recognize that many of you might be alone under your own roof this holiday season, and we are here for you too. Even in years without pandemics, the season can be fraught with sadness, feelings of loss, and even depression. CCC is not just a collection of spiritual seekers. It’s also a gathering of loving nurturers, and if you find yourself struggling in any way this holiday season, or at any other time, we invite you to reach out to us and say so. This is not a place with a lot of rules, but there’s one biblical teaching that we keep front and center, and that is to love one another and to care for each other as we would ourselves.

We are reminded that while love is a feeling, it is also an action. It is seeking — above all else — the health, prosperity, and well-being of everyone. To love the hungry is to feed the hungry. To love the earth is to protect and heal the environment. To love our neighbor is to show them kindness. But there's something even deeper than that. On this last leg of our Advent journey, we tune ourselves to **love** as the Source and Ground of Being of all that is. It's not just the central core of the Advent message; it's not just the true meaning of Christmas; it's even more than the core teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. At a cellular level, love is the basis of life itself. It is the energy that some of us call God, though as we like to say here, it's not required that you do.

From my earliest memories of Sunday School and church come the echoes of voices saying "God is Love and Love is God." I've never thought of that idea as metaphor. For me it captures something essential. It speaks of one single, pure energy, without which none of life could happen and no worlds could be created. Love the energy that we call "life;" it is that which breathes us and beats our hearts.

Tomorrow's winter solstice marks the turning of a very important page in human history, far beyond the change of political winds. After decades of speaking of the illusive nature of unity and oneness across humanity, the globe has suddenly become united against a common enemy, and this time it's not a totalitarian regime or an authoritarian despot. The war is not against an ideology, a religious ideal, or a political movement. It's about a teeny tiny little virus that has invaded us from every angle. Its effects are ubiquitous, and the irony of it is that the only way we can win is to pull together.

There are encouraging signs that this is happening, but there are also steep challenges in getting people to understand the difference between fact and fiction, between science and wishful thinking, between selflessness and selfishness. Another thing that these global realities are pointing out are some worn out ideas of the very essence and nature of God. I'm afraid that Western religion in general has burdened itself with an image of God that resembles a cosmic old white man, the one who always knows when you've been bad or good and parcels out reward and punishment accordingly. This mythic idea has done a great deal more damage to the human psyche than any belief in Santa Claus. It's taken the Divine Wisdom of the universe and placed "him" in a compartment so far removed from us, that we've had to create an array of theological and ecclesiastical systems to mediate our relationship to the Holy One. We've built our own bridges to try to get across what we perceive as the gap between what is human and Divine, and like all the bridges we make, they eventually collapse, leaving us feeling stranded and alone.

If there's anything at all I have learned from this pandemic, it is to focus my attention only on the things that really matter. If someone handed me a check for a million dollars today, I'd be more likely than at any other time in my life to shove it in the bank and go on about my business, at least for now. I've come to the conclusion that there is very little that I need in order to maintain a happy, healthy, prosperous human life. I'm giving away clothing. A broken dish doesn't get replaced, because we have so many others in the cupboards. I've started quoting my grandmother whose depression-era mantra was, "Use it up, wear it out; make it do, do without." I hope this doesn't make me an old Scrooge this Christmas. I just want to be someone who lives in a global family, someone who has realized how mindless I've been in occupying my space on this planet.

Love, you see, can never be mindless. To the contrary, to love is to be mindful of the very simple and profound fact that together we are of one essence, one spirit, and one purpose. Today's candle signifies the Divine Light of Love, reminding us not only of its existence, but that it is existence itself. When the psalmist spoke of love, it was the love that was steady, steadfast, immovable, unconditional, eternal, established in the heavens themselves. It just doesn't get any more basic or essential than that. It's probably what led Mother Teresa to say that "There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more dying for a little love." She recognized our Western "poverty of spirituality" as she called it, before reminding us that the "hunger for love is the hunger for God."

Over the last four Sundays we have found that Hope lives deep within us, at the very core of our being. It's not wishful thinking, but a recognition of the magnificent gift that is actually on its way. We can see it coming. Peace is our longing. Joy gives us the energy and the means. Love is the essence of it all. This week as we celebrate the beautiful and beloved story of the Nativity, it is with the understanding that we are turning the page. It is the threshold of a new era, not one where everything is perfect and we get every last present that we asked for.

With the birth of a new baby comes years of care and nurture, teaching, shaping, molding, and equipping before the baby reaches adulthood. It doesn't happen over night, and it doesn't happen without challenges. But with the newborn comes a complete change of trajectory, and that is what is happening now among us. If we are to say what new thing is trying to be birthed in the world today, I think we could all agree it is a shedding of the old forms that never served us well in the first place and the opening of ourselves to a whole new way of being. That way is called love. And there's really nothing else.

