

November 29, 2009

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

“The Care and Feeding of Souls”
Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

This is the first Sunday of Advent. We begin today to prepare for the celebration of Christ’s birth. Each year we experience a longing, a hope, a desire for Christ to be born in our hearts afresh. During this time, we are invited to reflect upon the many ways God comes in Christ. God came into history 2,000 years ago in the flesh of a child born in a stable. God comes into our present through his Holy Spirit, speaking to us and through us in our daily lives. Christ will come in full glory at the end of time, which is a mystery beyond human understanding.

Today’s Scriptures reflect these various dimensions of Christ’s coming. The text from 1 Thessalonians is a portion of the first letter Paul wrote to the first church established in the ancient city of Thessalonica. When Paul wrote these words, he had established the church there just a few months before sending the letter. The young, newly hatched church still occupied his thoughts and prayers. Even though he was preaching and making converts in Corinth, his mind traveled frequently to Thessalonica and to the little band of Christians there.

Paul had received word from his teammate Timothy that their Thessalonians brothers and sisters had remained strong under stress and persecution. Paul celebrated this message, but urged them to experience further growth and spiritual development. Pastor and preacher Rev. Leonard Sweet points out that “a converted Christian is not a completed Christian”. Paul called those following Christ to a life-long task of growing a soul that is responsive to the impulses of Christ’s presence and love. He calls us to that same task today.

The ancient church expected the second coming of Christ to be imminent. They lived in a state of expectation that thought “Any day now”. Paul told them, even in the midst of persecution, to understand and live out the following strategy: ***May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and FOR EVERYONE ELSE, just as ours does for you.*** Christian love holds fast in persecution and always reaches out BEYOND the church, beyond the safety of the community of faith. This was the tactic Paul stressed for those who were preparing for Christ’s coming.

We are like the Thessalonians in preparing for Christ's coming—because we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. However, as the centuries have passed, we have lost the sense of urgency about the second coming of Christ. Our preparations for Christmas are often held in a realm of sweetness and sentimentality. We don't do much about assessing the state of our souls, but that's what Advent is for!

Believe it or not, a psychotherapist, James Hillman, has discovered the soul is an important concept for effective therapy. In the book, *We've had 100 Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*, Hillman came up with an image: to develop fully each human person must undertake to “grow a soul”. Each of us is like an acorn, born with a soul seed. It's our job to make choices in life that will nourish this seed, so it may grow and we will become the person God created us to be.

Thomas Moore, a student of Hillman's identifies “soul-sickness” as an epidemic sweeping our planet. Symptoms of this sickness include “emptiness; meaninglessness; vague depression; disillusionment about marriage, family and relationships; yearning for personal fulfillment; a hunger for spirituality.” He explores these issues in his book *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in everyday life*.

We neglect our souls and we suffer. As we begin Advent together, why not recommit ourselves to the care, nurture and feeding of our souls? This is a time set apart for us to strengthen our souls so Christ will live in us and work through us in the world!! Let's be intentional about caring for our souls. Comedienne Lily Tomlin points out the importance of paying attention to how we grow and develop into the person we long to be. She quips, “I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific!”

Rev. Leonard Sweet suggests four important points of focus in the care and feeling of our souls: Community, Work, Food and Space. Let's consider how these might be important to us this Advent season.

First, COMMUNITY. The soul craves community. Where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, God is present. We need to gather, to share, talk to, pray with, challenge and love each other. In a community we always find variety: varieties of experience, opinions, ideas, feeling, expressing ourselves. All of these form the richness of fertile soil where the seeds of our

souls can sprout and grow. Be sure to spend time in nurturing community this Advent season.

Second, WORK. The work we do must not be soul-destroying or soul-devouring. Work may be well-paid; it may be prestigious; it may bring us what we thought we always wanted. But if it does not help us tend our souls by tending to our friends, families and world, then it will eat away at our souls. Work can be what the world calls “menial” and be very soul-enriching. I used to kid my children when I insisted they help clean house; “Cleaning toilets is good for your soul.” I still believe that. It gives us an appropriate understanding of humility: No one’s hands are too good to clean a toilet. It also serves the well-being of those who live together in the home.

I have even found mowing a lawn to be soul-food. I am renewed by the fresh air; I have time to think and pray, my body is active, and I can see the immediate results of my work and feel pride in the accomplishment. Of course, menial work can be demeaning- it depends on the circumstances. But we must be aware that we NEED to work, for our souls to grow. AND we need to listen to God’s murmurs in our hearts regarding the work we choose and do, at every stage of our lives—as we enter the work force as young adults through and beyond retirement from specific paid work. This Advent season, ask God to help you as you reflect on how Christ is calling you to manage the work in your life.

Third, FOOD. I was surprised to find this on Rev. Sweet’s list of important areas for us to focus on if we are committed to caring for our souls. He states that eating healthy food is essential for our souls’ well-being. The body and soul are connected, each helping the other, if well-tended. Rev. Sweet also lifts up times of eating as opportunities for us to take delight in God’s creation and bounty. These are times to thank God for the simple ability to savor the richness and goodness of what God has made. We’re invited to give thanks for the labors of all those involved in bringing that food to our table. This focus can help us as we gather for all the holiday eating that is part of this season.

The fourth area Leonard Sweet proposes for our soul-nurture is SPACE. He writes, “Every soul has a different space requirement. Some souls need acres of wilderness to stretch out their potential. Other souls only need a private corner in the midst of a busy household to find peace. The need for soul-space used to be hallowed by the traditional ‘prayer closet’ set up in many

Victorian homes. What would your soul require as its special space? A window, a piece of art, a comfy chair, a babbling stream, a candle, the smell of incense? Do you even know your soul well enough to know what space it needs?" What a great question. Make this Advent season a time for exploring the answer to that question: What space does my soul need for its growth and well-being?

Advent is a time for soul-shaping, for strengthening our souls so Christ will live in us and work through us in the world!

The gospel text provides Christians with a dramatic call to WATCH and BE READY for Christ's arrival at any time. The four points above can help us DO that. We are easily drawn away from the life that nourishes our souls. Intentional focus on how community, work, food and space are present or absent in our lives can enable us to resist temptations and grow in strength as followers of Jesus Christ.

This week, write down on your calendar, or on a sticky note on your dashboard, or bathroom mirror one soul-devouring temptation that faces you this holiday season. Focus on experiences of community, work, food and space in your life, with God's help. Look for support in your community of friends, church and family. Reflect on how your work impacts your soul. Pay attention to how food affects your life. Identify the space you need and provide that space for yourself. Make changes that will strengthen you to be able to avoid temptation.

Your soul is important. Christ came into the world, lived and died that your soul might live. Advent is a time for soul-shaping so Christ will live in us and work through us in the world. With his help, may we use this time to that purpose. AMEN! AMEN!