

The readings for this time of year, for the beginning of Advent, are quite tough, with many interpretations. The gospel lesson this week is “apocalyptic,” about two working in the field and one is taken and the other is “left behind.” It is talking about the end of the world, comparing it to the flood at the time of Noah, where some people are saved while others perish. These warnings have similarities to Jesus parable about the sheep and the goats...a form of “dualism,” a last judgment that is black and white, people are good or evil! I think Jesus used stark and dualistic rhetoric in order to make a point. Reference to a flood coming unexpectedly is Jesus way of showing “urgency”... urgency to choose the right, the way of light. And we hear many sermons on urgency, on being ready for Christ’s coming or second coming. But I chose to avoid all that and address the passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans, and then I added the core biblical message about loving neighbor as self.

Yet Paul’s words to the church at Rome have quite a bit of dualism as well! He says: “Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” We strive to know the best path to walk, a path of light, of truth and love. The path of light surely must involve following the core commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. Notice that this core commandment to love neighbor as self was given by Jesus and Paul, but first given by Moses (Leviticus Chapter 19!) Notice that it is simply the Golden Rule, found in most all religions, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

We all fall short of the ideals of Christian love, so we also need the other part of Paul’s sentence: “Lay aside the works of darkness!” The Bible is always mentioning sin and evil; we can’t really put on the armor of light until we cast off other “clothing” that hinders us from being kind or loving. We can’t escape it - we must name sin as words and actions that cause harm, whether at an interpersonal or international level. The “armor of light” surely refers to not only Love, but Truth. We remember that Jesus said the Truth will set us free... So the Truth might reveal some sin, even some

attitude that we need to change, some darkness we need to “cast off” in order for light and love to fill our world.

I like to lift up some of the best from the United Church of Christ (UCC) daily devotionals, and this week Phiwa Langeni wrote a great interpretation of Jesus’ saying that he came “not to bring peace, but a sword.” Phiwa says: *Jesus cuts into our world with a tool of destruction. Unlike typical sword wielders, he severs the systems that oppress those most in need. He dissects the divisions that perpetuate violence. He hacks the hate that poisons our world. We've become so familiar with our communal sinfulness and individual unwellness that healing feels like a threat... which makes Jesus' unexpected tool choice (a sword), even more essential, for making precise and purposeful incisions.* This reminds me of Jesus’ saying that if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, and if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Yes, extreme words from Jesus, not meant to be taken literally I assume, but Jesus makes a point that is hard to miss: We need to cut things out of our lives that are destructive.

While we each need to work on our own cleansing and refining (versus judging others), Paul does offer some examples of “works of darkness” for his readers to consider: “reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy!” Did I mention the dangers of dualistic thinking? Surely there is value in admitting there are grey areas to good and evil. Let’s start with the last phrase, “quarreling and jealousy.” Surely not all quarreling is bad; all families and friends have their quarrels. Sometimes it’s good to vigorously negotiate differences, but just as surely it is wise to “choose our battles.”

Paul refers to alcohol. Rather than simply put it in the category of good or evil, common sense sees that the danger or harm is in an excessive use. Many like to “revel,” to imbibe a bit to loosen the tongue and prompt some healthy laughter. But Paul points to excessive drinking, drunkenness, that can harm many, as well as the self.

Paul also refers to sex. Again, the danger, as Paul wisely points out is in the “excess” ... as in “debauchery or licentiousness.” Psychologists

wisely point out that as with alcohol, there can be unhealthy obsessions or addictions to sex. There may need to be some precision cutting out or “casting aside,” if there is to be room for light and love. I’m writing this in a hotel room, where last night, after 10pm, the norm for quiet, the couple in the next room were having a knock down drag down fight, complete with yelling and swearing, and sounds of things being thrown. Through the wall, I heard many words about who slept with who, and who was first having affairs. It ended, as could be expected, with one promising divorce, slamming the door, and storming out of the hotel with suitcase. It seemed to me that one or both had an excessive focus on sex, especially extramarital sex. There is no room for genuine love when any sort of addiction takes up all space in one’s head. There are things that sometimes have to be “cut out” of lives, as Jesus was indicating in saying that he brought a sword.

So in order to grow in love, to love neighbor as we love ourselves, often we have to submit to the “refiner’s fire” as the prophets say and we hear each year in Handel’s Messiah. But just as importantly, we have to find ways to love ourselves, to truly feel accepted, accepted by God and by others. Phiwa Langeni, who wrote the wise commentary on Jesus bringing a sword for “precise and purposeful incisions,” identifies as part of the LGBTQ community. The way I see it is that leaders in the LGBTQ community are often the ones who remind us to be our *authentic* selves. Leaders in the Yoga communities also remind us to love ourselves and find our true selves... Honesty in life is being oneself, thus loving oneself. Too often we try to fit into molds that others seek to impose on us.

One more example, staying with the theme of loving oneself. I was listening to a webinar of a master pianist, by the name of Kenny Werner. He has played in many jazz clubs around the country and teaches at Berklee School of Music. Well, if I had to share one takeaway, one central point of his two hour talk attended by some 250 Zoom faces, it is that he kept telling us to be ourselves, to love ourselves, *to love every note we play!* The opposite, of course, is to keep judging our music by some standard of

*perfection* (which does not exist!) Whether improvising or playing a classical piece, a musician needs to make the song his or her own, to interpret the song from authentic feelings. As the webinar progressed, it turns out that Kenny Werner alluded to his own struggle with addiction, an addiction that did not allow him to be his true self. The addiction seemed to be tied to perfectionism, the very thing that causes many people to stop playing or singing music, as it did with my own mother. She stopped playing, as she felt my father was much more natural and played by ear at the piano. As a jazz musician, Kenny Werner learned to relax more, not judge the sounds as good and bad, right and wrong. He learned to cut out the dualistic judgement and love whatever music he created, thus loving himself. I identify somewhat with his salvation from “musical perfectionism” and self-criticism, to more freedom and enjoyment in making music!

I can't resist one more example of loving ourselves, our authentic selves, flaws and all. I was talking with a good friend about perfectionism, and she related a story about when her son was young. Apparently he was drawing and coloring the picture of a bee, but when he finished he did not like the way he had colored outside the lines, so in frustration he ripped up his artwork. His Mom knew this was a “teachable moment,” so she lovingly taped together the pieces, and hung it on his door, adding a proud title: “The Mistaken Bee!” It was indeed a beautiful piece of artwork for anyone his age. Mistakes and imperfections are natural, and she wanted him to learn that.

Yes, to put on the armor of light, we need to cut harmful things out of our lives, and one of them is *perfectionism*. Mistakes are part of all of our lives, from birth to death. We are all “perfectly imperfect” as one T-shirt says! Accepting this fact is one path to loving ourselves, (living in Grace) ... and if we love ourselves, we can more easily fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves!