

Homily – Prepare for Grace

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Holiday music makes me feel empty, but Advent and Christmas carols make me feel whole. Let me explain.

This past week my daughter and I talked about the difference between Christmas carols, Advent carols, and Holiday music.

Christmas carols are songs about the birth of Jesus. “The First Noel”, “Silent Night”, and “Joy to the World” are all Christmas carols we will sing Tuesday in our Christmas Eve services.

Conversely, Advent carols are songs about the coming of Jesus. In this music, Jesus hasn't yet been born as a baby boy, and Advent carols are about preparation. Most of us are familiar with “O come, O come Emmanuel,” but we are not as familiar with “Prepare the way, O Zion”, “Come thou long expected Jesus”, or [the song we just sang] “Savior of the nations, come.” We have a whole section of Advent carols in our hymnal, but we don't hear very often them on the radio.

What we usually hear on the radio in December is Holiday music. These are the familiar warm and fuzzy songs that have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus. We all know and love “Santa Claus is coming to town”, “Winter Wonderland”, and “Silver Bells”. Songs about Christmas presents, family gatherings and snow can make us remember the trappings of the holiday, but they should not be confused with music about the birth of Jesus – an event that changed the universe forever.

We often lump Christmas carols, Advent carols, and Holiday music together. As I was writing this sermon, I was streaming Holiday radio on Apple Music. And, as I said Holiday songs make me feel a bit empty, because they aren't about anything. One song just kept repeating the word “Christmas” and once in a while would say “it is Christmas time.” There wasn't anything to it.

So, I found another station on Apple Music called “Classical Christmas” which was much more enjoyable. These songs have meaning.

I make the distinction between these types of music because for me, some music has a wholeness to it and some makes me feel empty. For me, Christmas and Advent carols have a fullness to them while Holiday music is hollow. And, I want Advent, and beyond, to be a time when I shift from hollow things to things that have fullness.

Now, our Gospel reading today has a shift from hollow things to fullness that I want to illustrate with the words of an Advent carol.

One of the songs our choir sang in last week’s Advent Lessons and Carols service is the “Cherry Tree Carol.” Here is a summary of the words of that song.

After Joseph and Mary were engaged they were walking through a cherry orchard. (I’m not sure there were cherry trees in the Judea of two thousand years ago, but let’s just go with it.)

The song tells us Mary is with child and meekly asks Joseph to pluck her a cherry from a tree. And, Joseph with words most unkind says “Let him who got you pregnant, pluck you a cherry.” When the unborn baby in Mary’s womb heard these words to his mother, he commanded the tree to bend down and hand Mary a cherry. Then Joseph realized he had been a jerk, and he apologized.

Now, the words of this song have nothing to do with the Bible, but they fill in some gaps in a fanciful way. The words remind us Joseph was probably pretty grumpy when he first learned his betrothed was pregnant. In his grumpiness he may have had some unkind words that went beyond “Let him who got you pregnant, pluck you a cherry.”

But, we also know Joseph moved to a place of grace. We don’t know how long it took but he embraced grace.

In our Gospel reading we heard “When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”

Even before the angel of the Lord appeared in the dream, Joseph already had a change of heart. He was not going to expose Mary to public disgrace and the severe punishment that would have gone with it. The Law was quite explicit, and Joseph instead chooses to move beyond the Law. He chooses grace.

And, in this season of preparation, we are to follow the example of Joseph and recover a grace oriented spirituality. We have as God who is effervescent with grace. God had built grace into Joseph, and he builds it into us as well. But, we need to respond and embrace the way of grace. In this way we can transform our lives, our churches, and our society.

Now, the tension between the Law and grace is not easy. We often equate the Law with the Old Testament, and grace with the New Testament. Both are certainly part of our spiritual tradition. The story of Joseph and Mary shows us grace is meant to be placed around the Law without eliminating the Law. However, grace must supersede.

Put another way, there is a necessary boxing match between the two, but it is a match in which grace must win. When it doesn't, religion becomes moralistic. And, moralistic religion is merely the ego's need for order and control. And, I am sorry to say, this is much of our garden-variety religion.

In his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul has a lot to say about the tension between grace and the Law. The Law calls us to a spirituality based on requirements. We think we need to earn God's love. In addition, we condemn others who don't follow our particular rules.

However, when we base our spirituality on grace we are called into transformation. This type of spirituality also lets us remember that there

is nothing that we can do to increase God's love for us. And, there is nothing we can do to decrease God's love for us. We may not have earned it but God blesses us for just being God's beloved.

Perhaps we can think of the Law as a necessary first step, but if we stay there without moving up to grace, then the Law becomes a barrier to growth and transformation. It becomes an obstacle to love and mercy. The Law often frustrates the process of transformation because we are deceived into thinking that the Law is the end goal. But, the goal is always healthy relationship -relationship with God, others, and self. And relationships are built on love and grace.

Now the hard thing that we haven't talked about is that the Law allows us to hold onto grievances, while grace requires we move to forgiveness.

Forgiveness is hard when the harm continues to occur or there is fear that the harm will happen again.

Forgiveness is hard when it seems to say the damaging event never happened or that your pain doesn't matter.

Forgiveness is hard when it feels one sided, but it is still important.

Jesus models it after his resurrection.

Joseph models it and takes it to the next level after the visit by the angel in a dream.

And, I have seen some of you here today, model forgiveness in your own lives.

One of the nice things about forgiveness and grace is that they allow a person to move away from a hollow, empty way of being into a full and complete way of living.

In this Advent season, what things might you change or remove that are hollow or empty?

Do you spend money in ways that bring joy?

Is the busyness of the season masking a loneliness that should be revealed?

Are your expectations of a perfect meal with a perfect family realistic?

And, on the reverse side, what things might you do to bring fullness and completeness?

Might you give yourself the gift of forgiveness?

Might you make some space in your schedule to slow down and be with yourself?

Might you include someone you don't usually include?

Might you give someone grace who hasn't earned it?

Or, as silly as it may sound, might you change your music streaming from Holiday music to Advent and Christmas carols?

What do you need to do to follow in the footsteps of Joseph?

Perhaps you too, can accept and share God's grace.