

HOMILY ~ November 26/27

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Little Joey asked his mother at Christmas time: *“Mom, why do people put lights on their houses?”* *“They are celebrating Jesus’ birthday,”* she replied. *“When is Jesus’ birthday?”* he asked. *“He was born on Christmas,”* his mother replied. *“Jesus was born on Christmas?”* Joey exclaimed. *“What a coincidence!”* I think little Joey was not clear on the reason for the season, what do you think? That seems hard to believe, but we have to remember that our young people grew up during a time when it was not politically correct to mention Christmas. It has become happy holidays and season’s greetings. I read this week that we should avoid red and green decorations because that is too closely connected with Christmas. During COVID, we even had a Christmas or two when we did not come to Mass. I think it is good to remind ourselves that Christmas is not just about exchanging presents, throwing parties and decorating. Christmas is about celebrating the incarnation, the fact that Jesus came into the world in a human body.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. The first two readings are about bringing the light of Christ into the world. We hear *“Let us walk in the light of the Lord!”* and *“Let us throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”* How do we bring the light of Christ into the world? It is through our relationships. I am not suggesting that we stop giving gifts, throwing parties and decorating. I am just suggesting that we focus less on these things and focus more on our relationships. Our United States Surgeon General, Dr. Murthy, has told us that loneliness is a major public health threat, and he has just written a book about it. This was a problem before COVID, and COVID just made it worse. Loneliness leads to anxiety, depression, heart disease, dementia and shortens our life span. People frequently will not admit to being lonely because that leads to shame and embarrassment because we then identify ourselves as socially deficient or unlikable. I want to make some suggestions on how we can decrease loneliness.

First of all, I want to suggest that we focus upon our relationships during Advent and during the 12 days of Christmas and not focus so much on Christmas Day. If there are close friends or family members that we are estranged from, realize that we love them and need these people in our lives. Do what you can on a one-to-one basis before the group gatherings. A group gathering is not the place to do it. Maybe you just need to tell them that you love them. That can break down many walls. Stop ruminating about the past. That just brings back old feelings and makes them worse to the point that they take on a life of their own. Let go of the past.

During COVID our social interactions became very restricted. We cannot rely upon our spouse and our children to meet all of our needs. Those are unrealistic expectations that lead to loneliness. I suggest that you contact people that you used to have relationships with. I know myself that there are people that I have not had any contact with in a couple of years, and I feel funny contacting them after all this time. But when I do, I find that they needed to have contact with me as much as I needed to have contact with them. There are older people that became isolated during COVID and feel that they are totally alone. I urge them to come back to Church and contact the people that they used to have in their lives. Are there people that you used to visit and stopped due to COVID? Maybe it is time to reach out to them. All of us need to reach out to people that we know have become isolated. During COVID, we left food on people's porches instead of visiting them, and that was ok. We need to start the visits again.

During COVID, we learned to become afraid of other people because they could make us sick. We need to get over that. We have given up many of our relationships with people that we do not have close ties with. These social interactions are very important. These are the contacts that bring novelty into our lives. Your close friends and family probably have interests much like yours, and you can probably anticipate what they will say before they say it. There are people that you work with that you would never be friends with if you did not work together, but they bring another dimension into your life. If you work from home, you have lost all of those relationships. Social interactions with strangers are important as well. The person that knew your order at Starbucks, the wait staff at the restaurant you used to go to, don't you miss them? Studies show that the greater number of social contact you have every day the happier you are, even when they are contacts with strangers. So smile, make eye contact and have more social interaction.

We need more community connections. If you do not have community anywhere else, you can have community at Church. Get reconnected. During the week after Christmas, make some group connections. If you are working from home, invite your co-workers to your house or organize a gathering at a restaurant. If you are feeling lonely, find ways to serve others. God created us to be in relationship with others and to serve one another. This does not have to be a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter. Sometimes the greatest service you can provide for someone is to really listen to them and be totally present to them without looking at your phone. *During this Advent and the 12 days of Christmas, let's bring the light of Christ to others.*

Love & Peace,

Fr. Jim

