

**Advent 2: Love in the Midst of Hate – Rev. Janice Reynolds
Luke 1:68-79 and 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

**December 4, 2016
First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael**

That you have made us in the image of your own mystery
thanks be to you, O God.

That in the soul of every human being
there are depths beyond naming
and heights greater than knowing
thanks be to you.

Grant us the grace of inner sight this day
that we may see you as the Self within all selves.

Grant us the grace of love this day
that amidst the pain and disfigurement of our own lives
we may find the treasure that is unlocked by love,
that amidst the pain and disfigurement of my own life
We may know the richness that lies buried in the
human soul.

-from Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter – JP Newell

Love in the Midst of Hate – Rev. Janice Reynolds

All our lives, we've been taught in our Judeo-Christian culture that it is wrong to hate. We dislike the word hate. It seems so extreme. We like to think that there are few true instances of hate. All of our best leaders and wise teachers decry hate.

The *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* defines hate as a "deep, enduring, intense emotion expressing animosity, anger, and hostility towards a person, group, or object." Sigmund Freud defined hate as an ego state that wishes to destroy the source of its unhappiness. James W. Underhill, an anthropologist stresses that love and hate are always social, and culturally constructed.

So, if hatred, an internal disposition that breeds hostility, there is reason to be very interested and concerned about a group's disposition toward hate because this hate leads to anti-social acts. For example, Racial distrust can easily turn to hatred and then can morph into to violent acts or chronic acts of injustice.

The Men's Book Club recently read *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Women's Book Club read Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*. Both books illuminate their personal experience and the collective experience of being an African American male in this country. It can be uncomfortable for those of us who are a whiter shade of pale to read these books, and important that we do so.

Because there is no denying the experience of people who have been objects of racial hatred. And no denying that in some way the rest of us have been complicit.

Last summer, the 222nd General Assembly adopted a revision of the PC(USA)'s anti-racism policy, which in part reads: "Through colonization and slavery, the United States of America helped to create and embrace a system of valuing and devaluing people based on skin color and ethnic identity. The name for this system is *white supremacy*. This system deliberately subjugated groups of people for the purpose of material, political, and social advantage.

It goes on... "Racism is the continuing legacy of white supremacy. Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, for it says that some are less than others. It is also a lie about God, for it falsely claims that God favors parts of creation over the entirety of creation."

It's difficult to own up to our own identity as white supremacists. But it's important as we hear this term used more often in regard to certain people and groups, that we look at ourselves as part of a society that has benefited in many ways from white supremacy.

We don't harbor hate, certainly, but do we harbor radical love which is the only antidote for hatred?

We may sometimes take Love for granted. Love seems like the obvious steady-state for those of us who have learned all our lives that we are to Love One Another.

We might begin to side-line Love as not being all that helpful. Is Love just a feel-good emotion that is a luxury in a world that needs to correct many unjust actions?

But the kind of love that is needed now is a revolutionary love. We know revolutionary love when we see it because of the actions that arise from that love. When we are on the receiving end of love, we are more whole in our own humanity.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians: How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? And may God make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

Paul is grateful for the abounding love of this congregation in times of persecution. In times of turmoil, we must rely on Love. Love, like hate, breeds action... but the actions that flow from Love are constructive and creatively regenerating.

About a week before the election, David Brooks, the political analyst, wrote a column for the NYTimes reminding us about Martin Buber's teaching about I/Thou relationships. The I/thou approach to Love sees the Other person as precious, always unique and holy because they are holy in God's eyes.

This I/Thou relationship is contrasted with an I/It relationship, where we reduce the person across from us into what they can do for us, a perceived commodity where their value is only in what we can get from them. That's what racism is... where a person is reduced to certain imaginary attributes that subjugate them and where we take advantage of their labor but not reciprocate.

When we reduce each other to a role, or a race, or an economic class, we objectify the other. That's an I/It relationship.

I/Thou relationships, writes Brooks, are personal, direct, nothing is held back. It is when two or more people are embracing the other in a total unselfconscious way, without assumptions but with curiosity.

Buber argues that it is non-sensical to think of the self in isolation. "The I of ourselves exists only in relationship to God and to others. The development of the soul is inextricably bound up with that of the longing for the Thou," he writes. This means we need to be intentional and brave about our relationships. It means we need to risk a bit, to open ourselves to share of our true selves and be willing to receive the true self of the other person across from us, especially in times of tension.

We cease to reduce other people to a simple one-dimensional descriptive but see the other as a complex set of feelings, qualities and experiences.

The Mosaic Project is a non-profit group in Oakland, CA that teaching this brand of I/Thou Love. The Mosaic Project® teaches people — from elementary-school students to adults in the workplace — the skills they need to build the peaceful communities they envision. Since 2000, they've offered camp type experiences to children and teens with immersive, experiential-education programs in diversity, empathy, and conflict resolution. They've served more than 37,000 students and 7,000 adults.

Intentionally, they bring very diverse groups of kids and teens together – of different economic and racial backgrounds.

They teach kids to be:

- Assertive – strong without being mean
- Open minded and curious
- How to get to know one another better
- How to be “Calm, cool collected confident and clear”
- Practice skills through games, songs and all types of fun interaction.

What can we do to practice this kind of Love? What would it be like to so truly love one another that we thank God for the air they breathe as Paul does in his letter to the Thessalonians?

First, may we be willing to learn about how we are complicit in overt and complicit ways, how we've kept ourselves sheltered and apart from people who are different from ourselves.

We might seek out places to hang out with people different than ourselves and enjoy them as human beings. Come and be a loving presence at Short Elementary School... come be in relationship with darling kids who come from very different backgrounds than we do!

We may never make up for the wrong that was done by our society and is still being done to indigenous people and people who were imported from their native lands for our country's economic gain.

But we can practice I/Thou love. We can look someone in the eye and behold them as beloved complex individuals.

When we think of anyone different from ourselves and feel an upwelling of hateful thoughts and feelings, may we in our thoughts and prayers bring them closer to us as we regard them as Thou, and seek understanding.

As we anticipate the coming of Christ during this Advent season, may we know that we are accompanied by a God who loves us just as we are, loves everyone just as they are, in all our diversities and complexities.

And we can be assured with the words of Luke:

Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
Shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting in the shadow of death,
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
down the path of Shalom, the path of love.