

"Hope For Christmas"

December 2, 2012

"The more I learn, the more I learn how little I know." the words are attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. They are similar to the Chinese master Lao Tze who said, "The more you know, the less you understand." Or maybe George Bernard Shaw who said, "The more you learn, the more you know. The more you know, the more you forget. The more you forget, the less you know. So why bother to learn?"

I can relate to these sentiments. There are times we ask, why bother?

Why bother when it seems that no matter how hard we work to become good at something, no matter how hard we study or how many books we read, it just seems that increased knowledge tells us we have further we have to go.

Maybe you remember a time when you were younger and you were mastering the yo-yo, you finally learned how to "walk the dog" with your yo-yo and you got to school and showed all the other kids on the playground. Then some other kid showed up and could do "rock the baby in the pyramid." and "the man on the flying trapeze." And you realized there was more to learn.

Or maybe you got to university, earned that Bachelor's Degree and then realized that what you really needed was a Master's degree or maybe even a PhD if anyone was ever going to consider you to truly be a master in your field..

Or think about it, parents. For every day we're loving, patient and totally focused on our kids, there will be a day when we feel hassled, hurried, and distracted when it comes to dealing with our children.

The reality is that we can always do better. It seems we're always lacking in some area, some facet of our lives.

But we're most aware of what we lack in those areas that are the most important to us . . . those parts of our lives we invest the most into. Those parts we spend the most time thinking and praying about. We can be content with so-so pie pastry or resigned to the fact

that we'll never be able to back-up with a trailer because those are less important parts of our lives (unless, of course, you're a dessert chef or drive a tractor trailer).

But we feel keenly our shortcomings in our parenting, our relationship skills or our professional arenas. Why? Because these are parts of our lives we have struggled to perfect; These are places where we have put our hopes, sometimes wear them on our sleeves and they just never seem to come to complete fruition. Things just never end up perfect and neither do we!

The news columnist Thomas Friedman once wrote: "You know when I really get mad? It's when my wife tells me I'm not helping around the house and I have not been helping around the house. There's nothing more enraging than someone exposing your faults and being right."

Yes, we're all less than perfect.

How easy is it for you to name your faults?

The reality is if we believe we lack nothing, then we have no hope because we don't need hope.

But we all need hope don't we? Because we are all lacking.

A few years ago a colleague of mine told a story about how his daughter wrote this end of term report in third grade. She wrote that she "lacked school and lacked all the subjects she had been studying." Very clearly what she liked was also what she lacked ...more learning!!! Although a quick tutorial with his daughter means she will no longer spell the word "like" as l-a-c-k, the reality is that the traits we most like about ourselves are also the areas in which we will find the most lack in ourselves. It's a truism of life.

On this first Sunday of Advent our Scripture lesson reminds us that Paul is both overwhelmed with a sense of liking and a sense of lacking. He is thankful for the Thessalonians' continued faithfulness. Yet at the same time he is very concerned that the young congregation may still be lacking in faith development. These were things that Paul couldn't give them. They had to look to Christ for the things they lacked.

Most scholars believe that Paul probably spent 3 or 4 months with the Thessalonians when he initially got them started. The Thessalonian church had really become an example to some of the other neighbouring congregations. As Paul says in chapter 2, "When you got the

Message of God we preached you didn't just pass it off as another human opinion, you took it to heart as God's word true to you, which it is. God is at work in you believers." Yet Paul also knew that there were still some things that they lacked.

At some level we're all like the Thessalonian Christians. We have started on a faith-journey. It's that very start that calls us to learn more, to make up for what is lacking, to continue and complete our discipleship. What the Thessalonians lack is what many of us lack but would like to have: the experience and maturity of a faith lived solely for God.

In fact, what the Thessalonians truly lacked was something that Paul himself could not teach them. Paul could not teach them what it meant to live a life of faith with its ups and downs...its Apocalypses and Advents. A life of faith was something that the Thessalonians had to live for themselves. It wasn't about what Paul could do for them. It was about what Christ could do for them and give them what they lacked.

This may be the season of Advent on the church calendar. But for those who are immersed in the world of retail sales, this is the time of year that determines whether you will end up in the red or the black. In retail, the season of Advent is the time retailers hope to be liking rather than lacking.

I'm sure many of you have already been out doing some Christmas shopping. You can testify that we have moved into shopping madness days. Suddenly the entire population of Canada seems possessed with finding and purchasing something for a whole list of people.

No matter if your family is living a perfectly comfortable life, with sufficient food and shelter and clothing. At this time of year we all are looking out for what is somehow lacking in the lives of our loved ones so that we may purchase it for them.

But as we try and make up through shopping for the physical things we lack, let's never forget that the ultimate lacking in our life are not physical but spiritual. Maybe you lack spiritual depth? Maybe you lack the confidence of the promise "I can do ALL things through Christ who strengthens me." Maybe you lack the hope of living God's dream for you and your family. Maybe you lack forgiveness for some secret sin. Maybe you lack that passion you used to have in your walk with God. Maybe you lack....

Why not compile a shopping list of spiritual lackings this Advent season. And don't just consider them to be spiritual lackings. See them as spiritual yearnings. As Christmas wish prayers. These are places where you have hope in your life. A hope that is real.

Remember: if we lack anything, Jesus has promised us to supply what it is we lack. In fact, all we need to do is ask and it shall be given. Knock and the door will be opened. We already have all we need. We already have all we lack. It's our inability to hope for and receive what is already there and what God has already provided for us that causes our lacks.

There is an anonymous e-mail making the rounds. It's not a take on 1 Thessalonians 3 but it is a take on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, Christmas style. It goes: If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss your partner

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, new socks will get holes.

But giving the gift of love will endure.

You see what this world lacks the most isn't more stuff. What the world lacks the most this Advent season is the hope that God can give us what we lack...namely the gift of love divine. As you receive the bread and the cup this morning I encourage you to offer your prayers of hope. When you take the cup, offer up your hopes for others. When you receive the bread, what are the hopes you have for yourself? Advent is a time of hope. There are the things we hope for and more importantly as we await the coming of Christ, we behold the hope that God has for us and for the world.

Thanks be to God.