

This has been an unusual and, in many ways, difficult year.

And now it's Christmas.

Last Christmas I was given the gift of a pedicure. I'd never had one before and was very nervous about it. But I put on my big girl pants and went downtown, and surprise! It was not too painful and I liked the way my toes looked afterwards. So I've been back. Last time I was there I overheard another customer asking her hygienist whether they celebrate Christmas in Vietnam. 'Yes', she replied, "I mean they have Christmas everywhere really."

They have Christmas everywhere.

Of course that's not factually true. There are many people across the world, and even here in our county, who do not celebrate Christmas. But in another way it is totally true. It's Christmas everywhere.

Because Christmas is when we remember the incarnation, God becoming human. And although God became human in one time and place because we humans are limited, God is not limited and so God incarnated everywhere and for all time. The Christ event is not limited to Bethlehem, it is not limited to the places where Christmas is celebrated. It has significance throughout the cosmos. And neither is it limited to one or two days in the dark of the year - Christ is incarnating in every moment, and in every part of creation.

Christ lives in every human, but it is up to us to grow and nurture the presence of the Christ in each other. Those of us who have been baptized have vowed to seek and serve the Christ all persons. It is part of our fundamental understanding of the world that Christmas has come to all, regardless of where they live, regardless of what they believe. Incarnation has happened, is happening here and now.

Incarnation is nurtured whenever we experience compassion.

Whenever we allow ourselves to experience another person's love and caring for us, whenever we love our neighbor, incarnation grows just a little bit. Because God is love and whenever we love we are resonating with God.

Not all love is the same. We have all experienced jealous love, love which in its longing demands rather than gives. Most of us have experienced the pain of unrequited love, when our love is offered but rejected. It is rather like the strings of a piano. When I play middle C, all the other C strings also vibrate. In the same way, whenever we love, however poorly, we are vibrating with the same frequency as the love which is God but in a different octave.

I think the reading we heard from the very short New Testament letter of Titus is helpful with its idea that "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us..." We are not instantly transformed into mature, loving humans fully expressing God's love, but the grace of God trains us. We are being trained to be the continuing incarnation of God. The grace of God works in our lives, if we allow and welcome the Holy Spirit, to train us to have compassion on ourselves, and on our neighbor. Those two things go together. Compassion for ourselves is a healthy humorous self-assessment that knows we are doing our best even when it doesn't all work out as we think it should. Compassion for our neighbor is the acknowledgement that they too are doing their best in the moment and that together we can flourish more fully than apart.

Jesus gave us two great commandments: to love God with all of ourselves and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is within this triangle of relationship between God, our neighbor and ourselves that incarnation is nurtured and grows.

The birth of Jesus the Christ in the stable at Bethlehem was only the beginning of the never-ending story of God entering into human life not as an outsider but from within us. Love entered humanity in a whole new way. What we do with that is up to us, because God never imposes

herself on us.

Some of us continue to nurture anger and resentment and judgmentalism. We choose to see the world as hostile and we turn away from God and away from the paths of love. We imagine ways that we can get our own back on other people. This quickly turns to hatred, and hatred to violence. You don't need me to remind you of all the ways that we have seen this dynamic in our world in the past few months.

But others of us practice love and try to walk the path of peace. We practice forgiveness and keep on praying for our enemies even when forgiveness seems an impossible ideal. We follow the Prince of Peace, trying to live with gentleness and to magnify love wherever we find it. Even in the midst of great pain and difficulty there are those who respond to the situation with love and compassion. These are the ones who have allowed themselves to be trained by the Holy Spirit.

And in their hearts the angel's song rings clearly, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Which is all of us. We are God's favorites, we are God's beloved.

Wherever love is, there is the incarnation. And wherever God is, there is love. There is no place that we can hide from God's love. Not even in Mosul or in Aleppo, not even in the waters of the Mediterranean, or in the waves of political change.

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