

Season of Peace & Love by Aeren Martínez

In preparing for my sermon this week Jeannine showed me a meditation on Christmas written by Sister Mariola López Villanueva, RSCJ, which I've been translating for my own enjoyment and now for the RSCJ international website. She makes reference to a story called "*The Voyage*" written by Eduardo Galeano and I found a source translation on line:[1]

Oriol Vall, who works with newborns at a hospital in Barcelona, says that the first human gesture is the embrace. After coming into the world, at the beginning of their days, babies wave their arms as if seeking someone.

Other doctors, who work with people who have already lived their lives, say that the aged, at the end of their days, die trying to raise their arms.

And that's it, that's all, no matter how hard we strive or how many words we pile on. Everything comes down to this: between two flutterings, with no more explanation, the voyage occurs.



Altar installation showed the advent wreath having more weight than consumerism (represented by the television.)

The song playing as you came into the sanctuary today is called Song For R. written by Samantha Parton and sung by her trio *The Be Good Tanyas*. It is a haunting song with lyrics that cut to the soul. I wanted to read a few of the lines to give you a sense of the song...

You see people coming from all sides
With their broken hearts and hollow eyes
And you try to love but it's easier to hate
When the seed that was planted was watered too late
It was late last night when the doorbell rang
My brother in some trouble

...

Then I cried for the sadness of his life
And his lonely struggle with addiction
Friends say oh what a shame
Mum says no one but himself to blame
But I don't want to play that game
'cos I know the truth is not so plain
Call it a hard life or a lack of love

...He is just a child

...Arms stretched out for love

Today we begin celebration of Advent. As long as I can remember, this season has always been a period synonymous with "Peace on earth" and as such a period of great love. Isaiah's oracle alludes to this peace when he says,

They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up the sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Dwight Eisenhower might very well have read this Isaiah passage in preparing his now famous 1953 speech where he said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children."^[ii] Having been a career soldier I can tell you that Isaiah's words have special meaning to me especially now that I am retired. These days I rather fancy the idea of taking assault rifles and converting them into something that we can fish with or retrofitting an Abrams tank to be used as a combine on cornfields.

In times of war countries focus all their energies into winning the conflict and who can blame them after all if you are the victor you set the conditions for peace. But being the victor puts you in a superior position and when this happens, what negotiation is there? Peace is more than absence of war, the absence of conflict, or the absence of hate; peace is an abundance of equality, justice, and love.

Both of this week's New Testament readings remind us that Christ will return. But when I began to read Romans my eyes automatically started to scanned the previous paragraph, I can't help it. When I see a sentence begins with the words "and" or "therefore" I figure I've missed something important, so I have to read backwards and it is here I find the **essence that binds together** the season of peace. Beginning in 13:8 Paul writes,

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to **love one another**, for he who **loves** his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**" **Love does no harm to its neighbor.** Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

What does it mean to "Love thy neighbor and to do no harm?" I take it to mean – taking care of the vulnerable people of our society, the children, the homeless, the mentally ill, the infirmed; not just loaning your lawn mower or power tools to the guy next door. Paul then continues by telling us to wake up from the slumber, because our salvation is near. He invites us "to be ready and to cloak ourselves in Jesus Christ."

Unfortunately for us the simple truth is that when we engaged conflict, peace seems a bridge too far. We get wrapped up in who was right and who was wrong and forget about solutions to end the conflict in a **non-lethal way**. Lethality in this instance is not only the obvious "loss of life," I use it here

to include any permanent loss to the parties in conflict. How often have you seen a relative do what is thought of as irreparable harm to another relative and they don't speak to each other for years or decades? Or friends who do the same and break up long friendships? When the two are locked in struggle of right and wrong the conflict becomes lethal and both become victims.

We must go beyond the conflict and remember the cornerstone to Christ's teachings was to "love one another". We have a gut reaction to be RIGHT, to be superior to the person or country we are in conflict with. **But advent is not about superiority**, it is about letting go and opening up. It is about entering into a place of complete vulnerability and letting down our defenses and embracing Christ and having Christ be our shield. To accept Christ is more than just saying, "I believe." It means also believing in the transformative power of love and carrying it with us beyond advent. Edith Stein wrote: "It is not enough to kneel in front of the manger once a year so that our human lives become inundated with that divine life; it is better and necessary to let it envelop you and spend your whole life in contact with God."^[iii]

When Matthew warns us to stay alert, he says, "...keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come", it is a way of saying life is short. Matthew and Paul's letter to the Romans are both readings that deal with the second coming of Christ, yet they serve to remind us that we are beginning a different watch today – Advent, a preparation for Christ's birth.

I love this time of year...Christmastime, I love the songs, and last night I attended a concert here by Convivium. They sang

15th Century old English carols, Baroque and Renaissance works that I've never dreamed of and old favorites like Deck the Halls, Joy to the World and Silent Night. These songs put me in the "Christmas spirit" and make me feel like this is the best season of the year. I'd like you to take a moment and think, what was the best Christmas you ever had?

Do you have it?

I can clearly remember my favorite Christmas and the funny part is that it was not on Christmas at all. Now I won't kid you, as a child I loved getting gifts just as much as the next child, but we were a poor family and frankly my childhood had so many ups and downs it really was a more of a rollercoaster. In one of those down periods when my parents were separated, my brothers and I lived in Puerto Rico, as December 25 approached we anticipated Christmas, but my Mother told us that in Puerto Rico it was the Three Kings that delivered gifts and they wouldn't come until January 6th so we had to wait until Epiphany so see if we would receive a gift. I didn't feel cheated out of anything because all the kids in school said that they couldn't wait until "El dia the los Reyes" (All Kings Day). On January 5th I went outside and clipped some grass with my brothers which we then put in a shoe box under our beds just as our Mother told us to do. The next morning the grass was gone and there was a small gift left in its place. I got a little doll, it required no batteries, and it didn't eat, talk, or come with a dream house, so it and it wasn't particularly special, but I loved it just the same. I also loved that it was so different from Christmas in the United States. You see the grass was to feed the camels, and the gift was a thank you from the kings for feeding the camels. Advent was supposed to be a time for preparation and the celebration of the birth of Christ and

that's all we did at Christmas celebrate the birth. This is still a season that people wait for all year long; unfortunately, not for the same reasons.

Last week while most of us were saying grace, remembering what we have to be thankful for and then having our fill of the Thanksgiving Day meals; stores throughout the United States were preparing for "Black Friday." As ominous as that name sounds, it has come to be the defining day for businesses in the retail industry. The day that will determine whether this year was a good year or a bad year for retail sales. It is, I dare say, a holy day for those business. It's like we are all Santa Clauses and we are checking who's naughty and nice by virtue of the use of our credit cards. And isn't that what it really is about? We are consumer oriented society, we consume, and to consume we must spend, use, throw away, replace and continue the cycle.

To entice people to come out and spend, spend, spend – I heard of stores opening as early as 4:00 am and perhaps you heard of stores opening even earlier. In Tenelytown, where I work, shoppers were sleeping on the sidewalk out side of Best Buy waiting for the "SUPER ELECTRONIC DEALS!" that were promised by their ads. I find it ironic that a few years ago the only person that slept at that corner was a homeless man who these shoppers probably looked down upon, but now they were the braving the elements for that "50 – 70% off original the price".

At Community Council for the Homeless at Friendship Place (CCHFP) our outreach coordinator is accustomed to braving the elements too. His goal, however, is to look for homeless men and women who don't have a warm bed to go to at night. These

are people who sleep on the doorways of businesses, on subway grates, in park benches, or underneath a stairwell. They don't care about the sales at the department stores, because they can't afford to buy anything there anyway.

Where does a person like "R" go to when you can't show up at your sister's doorstep no matter how much she love's you? Because now she's married, has two children and you scare them?

CCHFP is a place where you can "come as you are." No one looks down upon you. Walk in and there is someone there who will greet you with a smile, offer you a cup of coffee or tea, a sandwich and a chair to rest your weary bone. You can talk a case manager and get voice mail set up so you can receive phone messages, set up a mail drop so you have a place to pick up your mail, get a clean pair of underwear, and when the nearby St. Columba's water ministry (which provides showers and laundry) is closed you can even get a shower and launder your clothes. CCHFP treats every person that comes in as our neighbor. The organization truly epitomizes "Love your neighbor" which is why I love working there.

On any given day I walk downstairs to our hospitality area and say hello to a dozen or more men and women who are coming in from the winter's cold or summer's heat. They seem to sense that I am taking time from my work day to see them and they make time for me by returning the greeting. But for me it is more than just being nice, being with them is keeping me grounded, it keeps me focused. I do fundraising. Talking to them keeps me in tune to what is really important. I do this job for them, not me. I am under no delusions that my job is hard, don't get me wrong, getting people to part with their

money is not easy, but I think the truly hard job falls to all our homeless services case managers and our one outreach coordinator who have to find housing, piece together broken lives to determine what benefits they might be eligible for, and in many, many cases try to tactfully suggest seeing the psychiatrist.

CCHFP has 22 congregations that serve on our board and support us in more than monetary ways. The founding congregations saw themselves as needing to live the role of being good neighbors. They opened the doors of the churches and started small congregational shelters that house 4 – 8 people depending on the amount of space available. They hired case managers, started the hospitality program, and eventually realized that they would need to begin to permanently house the most vulnerable of the homeless (those with disabilities).

In this season of peace I want to acquaint you with David Harris, one of our 37 permanently housed people. David is featured on CCHFP's current newsletter, *Reaching Out*. David spent three years living on the streets. For the past couple of years he has lived in a CCHFP sponsored apartment. We call him the Pilgrim Poet because he has been involved with a project of the Church of the Pilgrims called "The Pilgrimage" where young people come from around the United States to be with homeless people, perform community service, and write reflections about their experiences. David facilitates the writing of these high school and college students. I want to share with you one of his poems:

What I Want for Christmas

by David Harris [iv]

*I don't want Jesus wrapped in tinsel
And sold for \$19.95.*

*I want
Miles, Yardbird, Coltrane and Mingus
To come to life and perform
A concert in my yard.*

*And I want
Someone sweet and soft to hold
To warm me on these winter nights.*

*I want
Relief from the quiet horror
That grips me when I think about the way I live.*

I want random smiles from strangers;

I want freedom from the contempt I see in others' eyes

*When they see me carrying my house
On my shoulders.*

*I don't want
Desolate streets
Where my friends have disappeared
Into brightness and warmth forbidden to me.*

I want to never be hungry again;

I want to never be alone again.

*I want
To hear the carefree laughter
Of a child I love but rarely see.*

*I don't want
Caring friends asking if I feel cold at night
As if they could offer
A way to thaw the air I breathe.*

I want to never be a suspect again;

I don't want

Jingle Bells all day, or shoppers locked in combat

Over this season's most coveted toys.

I do want

Love

Peace

Security,

And on a cold winter night

I might see, above the glare of streetlights,

A lone bright star,

A blazing beacon overhead

And I'll wonder

Does it shine for me?

The answer to that

Is what I want for Christmas.

As an epilogue to my best Christmas ever I should tell you that, I am saddened to say that "El dia de los Reyes", AKA "Three Kings Day" or Epiphany is rarely celebrated now in

Puerto Rico. It's been replaced by a plastic Santa Claus with a huge sleigh and reindeer on the stairs of the city hall, and lawns throughout the island. This Caribbean paradise has fallen victim to the consumerism disease that plagues the mainland. Instead of do no harm to your neighbor we see a society that says; "Hey, I'll do what I want."

What I want for Christmas is what I wish all of you... make peace and love fully.

Amen

[i] **Voices of Time: A Life in Stories**
by Eduardo Galeano, translated by Mark Fried (Henry Holt, 341 pages) from
http://www.identitytheory.com/bookrate/bookrate_062006.php

[ii] **Dwight D. Eisenhower**, From a speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 16, 1953

[iii] E. STEIN, *The Mystery of Christmas*, by Edith Stein Selected Works, Burgos 1997

[iv] "Reaching Out", CCHFP Newsletter, Fall 2007