

COMMUNION MEDITATION I

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First Baptist Church

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Over a hundred years ago a Danish religious thinker by the name of Soren Kierkegaard, deeply concerned about the secular spirit of his society, wrote the following: (He called it "The Tame Geese" - an evangelistic meditation).

"Suppose it was so that the geese could talk - then they had so arranged it that they also could have their religious worship, their divine service.

"Every Sunday they came together and one of the ganders preached.

"The essential content of the sermon was: what a lofty destiny the geese had, what a high goal the Creator (and every time this word was mentioned the geese curtsied and the ganders bowed the head) had set before the geese; by the aid of their wings they could fly away to distant regions, blessed climes, where properly they were at home, for here they were only strangers.

"So it was every Sunday. And as soon as the assembly broke up each waddled home to his own affairs. And then the next Sunday again to divine worship and then again home - and that was the end of it. They thrived and were well-liking, became plump and delicate - and then were eaten on Martinmas Eve - and that was the end of it.

"So with the divine worship of Christendom."

What Kierkegaard showed is that the geese never did take seriously the dream to try their wings, and what disturbed him was that the people of his day were similarly indifferent to the spiritual challenge of religion. Christianity had become a matter of course so that people gave it a polite nod of acknowledgement and then went about the more important affairs of their daily lives indifferent to it. They were like plump geese preoccupied with feeding, spiritually tame, so plump and comfortable that they had forgotten how to fly - like our commercially bred turkeys. And man has wings, wings of imagination and the possibility of soaring to spiritual heights. But in his comfort, he has forgotten how. So it is with Christendom, said Kierkegaard.

Today many have the same conviction, and it seems even stronger in the Christmas season. There is such a contrast between the image of the quiet manger scene of Bethlehem and the bustle and glare of the Christmas scene in our cities. A character in one of Saul Bellows' books says: "I come from a religious family - we always celebrated Santa Claus and the Easter egg." Santa Claus and the Easter egg - not even Christian symbols - symbolize the secular spirit of the religion of our society. And it is Santa who dominates with all the pressures of

shopping lists, gift lists, Christmas cards and holiday feasts, so that there seems to be no room in the inn of our lives for the birth of the Christ child.

This is a familiar concern - we've all heard it before, and felt guilty, I'm sure. I don't intend to dwell on it, though. On the contrary, I want to suggest that there is a truth to the secular mood in religion which explains our persistence in it. And that truth is that religion must be relevant to our lives and our world, and that the marvelous thing is that the spirit of Christmas does break through the pressures of secular concern in spite of ourselves.

If this sounds perverse, consider the alternative. Of course we don't want to identify Christianity with whatever values we happen to hold dear in our society; but we don't want to go to the other extreme and see God as wholly apart from this world and religion as removed from human concerns. We surely don't want to return to the unhappy consciousness of medieval Christianity which saw its world as a vale of tears and looked forward to hope and joy only in the sweet bye and bye. The Christmas spirit is: "Joy to the world; the Lord is come," God came into the world at Christmas. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. God himself overcomes the separation between man and God in Christ.

Nor should we resolutely turn ourselves from the human joys of holiday festivities as if they were somehow wrong. The Puritans did this; they considered Christmas celebrations pagan and a disruption of their commitment to work in the spirit of righteousness. My puritan great-grandmother rejected Christmas decorations not only as pagan but as wasteful and tending to mess up the house.

We surely don't want to go back to the Puritan separation of joy and duty, happiness and righteousness, with the suspicion that whenever we really enjoy doing something it must be illegal, immoral or fattening. The spirit of joy is the spirit of religion, too.

We need some kind of larger understanding. The secular as defining the religious is not satisfactory. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. But the spirit of religion as sacred cannot be separated from our human concerns either. The sacred and the secular come together in what is best termed the sacramental view of the world.

Sacrament is a term Baptists resist. As Baptists we reject the view that communion is a sacrament; we call it an ordinance. This means that the celebration of the Lord's supper has no automatic spiritual efficacy or saving power by virtue of the rite itself or its elements. We do this in memory of Christ so that the communion may be the occasion for a spiritual renewal in ourselves. It is an inner experience of outward grace.

Yet in the broad sense, this is what the sacramental point of view suggests. The world is not wholly apart from God, so that we must choose between it and God, the secular and the sacred. The world is a vehicle for the purposes of God. It is a reflection of his creative power. It is an image of his order of beauty, goodness and truth. This is the meaning of the earth as sacramental.

This is the wonder of God that appears especially in the advent season. God is in history, in his world. God comes to earth at Christmas. A child is born who is the word made flesh. The secular is visited and transformed by the sacred. The world is open to the transforming power of God. A light shines in the darkness and joy in the hearts of men - to find God in the land of the living. This is the promise of advent.

Christmas will break through here and there in spite of everything. For example, some kid doing his shopping, without much money, wanting to buy his mother and dad something really nice - and a sales clerk forgets for a moment how her feet hurt, and is really helpful. - So Christmas breaks through.

There is another way of saying this. As the hymn puts it so beautifully, Love came down at Christmas. It is love that mediates between the human and divine. It is love that is the spirit of the sacred in the secular that lifts us in the creative power of God. God so loved the world that he gave his son as intermediary. It is love that draws God to man and man to God. Love is the message of Christmas, the heart of religion.

Love in all its forms has always been intimately related to religion. In our own Western tradition, before Christ, the Greek philosopher Plato described the ladder of love between man and the divine. In his famous dialogue, the Symposium, a series of speeches in praise of love, the conclusion is clear that there is no absolute separation between human love and love of the divine, but that love mediates and is the bridge to God. All love is desire to share in the creative spirit of God, to create in truth and beauty and goodness.

Here, I think, is the clue to our proper uneasiness about the secular spirit. It is so easy for love to be inverted to self-love. This is the spirit of the tame geese who thrive and become plump in their own comfort. And, let's face it, this is the spirit of our own age so often. We are dedicated to newer ways of enjoyment and are concerned for our own welfare. We may not go so far as to twist the basic commandment to read "Do unto others before they do you", but we are so sure that "God helps those who help themselves" that most of us think the Bible said it, not Ben Franklin.

Let's face it. So many of our concerns seem self-directed. The current focus on individual rights, for example, has a constricted focus. Margaret Mead has recently criticized the women's rights movement for its selfish interests, unlike the wider concerns of earlier movements. The whole tactic of insisting on one's rights contributes to divisiveness and fragmentation of society. No family can survive on this level of righteousness - nor can a society for long. Even within the religious communities there is a new interest in cultivating spiritual "highs" for oneself in charismatic experiences which is reminiscent of St. John of the Cross's concern about spiritual gluttony in his fellow mystics. In brief — the Santa symbol of Xmas - that I want this and this - is indeed too much with us.

But if self-love is a hindrance to a relation with God, and Jesus warns us that we must deny the self in order to follow him, there is still some truth to this focus on the self. We clearly have outgrown the view that we are worthless worms in the face of our obligation to worship the

almighty in love and adoration. When we repeat the classical confessional prayer, for example, after confessing that we have done those things we ought not to have done, we discreetly omit the next line - "and there is no health in us". We cannot believe in a God of love that marks such a separation between his goodness and our evil., There is some good in us in so far as we are creatures of God. No, the answer to self-love is not self-abnegation or self-hate -nor is it an adoration of a transcendent emptiness that bears no relation to our own lives.

Love, Christian love, the love which came down at Christmas, is creative love which shows the possibilities of goodness in the land of the living, which lifts us to our potentialities as children of God. It is other directed and self-affirming at the same time, for our selves are as large or small as the range of our relations directed outside ourselves. This is the creative power of the Christmas spirit that shows us that we gain our true self only as we deny the selfish self.

The love which came down at Christmas breaks through our lives in unexpected places. It may be in this season of the promise of peace and good will - the most significant example of God using history will be a Muslim leader, Sadat, making overtures for peace to Jewish leaders - and a gift from a Jewish grandmother, Golda Meier, to Sadat's grandchild as a symbol of a new creative thrust out of the bonds of self-love and concern.

I began with an illustration from Kierkegaard. I would like to conclude with another. In an illustration of God's love to man, Kierkegaard invites us to imagine a great king who fell in love, with a humble peasant maiden. How could he show his love? We could readily imagine a Cinderella ending, an elevation of the maiden to princess status. But then she would never know if he loved her as she was or only because she was elevated and changed. The only solution is for the king to take on the garb of a peasant and woo her as an equal. And so God takes the form of a servant in his love for man. Love - and this is the essential point - does not desire to alter the other, but itself. One does not show one's love by marrying another in order to change the loved one. But one can be transformed in the passion to change oneself to be worthy of a great love.

And so with man and God. Man does not seek to change God by prayer or otherwise to suit what he loves, but in the earnestness of his love seeks to transform himself in the image of what he loves as God.

Love moved God to become man - Love moves man to change from his narrow self and relate to the larger purposes of God. And man, too, has wings of the spirit. Man can fly.

As we turn to the spirit of God in this communion, in remembrance of Christmas, may the love which came down at Christmas touch and change our hearts in this service and throughout the advent season.