

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
December 26, 2010
Anita Rediger

...Presence

Recently, I overheard a conversation in the lounge area prior to the Swiss Village evening meal. (Some folks wait for supper by being seated on benches in the corridor near to my office.) Someone inquired, "Which number is next?" A person nearby replied, "Number 13." Then...from a seat a bit farther down the hall came a disbelieving word, "We're having 'turkey a la king?'" I loved it!

Homer Inniger, a 97 year old man with a great sense of humor, loves to tell this story, "One evening, an elderly couple who had been married many years were seated comfortably in their living room, each one in his or her "chair." -I'm wondering...how many of you have your own spot in the family room!- In any case, that evening, the old man felt a sense of gratitude and contentment come over him. He looked over at his wife and said, "My dear, our love is tried and true." The woman looked at her husband for a moment and responded, "I'm tired of you, too!"

Communication...it's a challenge **and** not only in late life! Communication requires intention in every aspect of our lives – in the various relationships in our families, in our work settings, when we are traveling, among members of a sports team, between the instruments of the symphony...etc.

We often use words in our attempts at communication, but as we know...there always seems to be room for improvement. To help us, there are all sorts of seminars, workshops, books, tools, memos, bulletin boards, sticky-notes, alarms, cell-phones, etc. to aide us in our attempts be clearly-connected with one another. Yet, sometimes, it is simply that words have their limits. When the spoken word isn't possible, we turn to written language. Beyond words we communicate with symbols and gestures. (Mia, I think of the importance of your growing skill in American Sign-Language. I also observe all sorts of gesticulating between coaches and quarterbacks!)

In this season, we seem most aware of the limits of spoken & written language. We string lights and savor the simple flame of a candle as we cherish the promise of Jesus, symbols of the "The true light, which shines in the darkness, a light which the darkness cannot overcome" (John 1). The visual symbol of our worship table: our Advent wreath, our Christ candle, our community candle...our individual candles finding their natural places on the worship table, our candle of care, the peace lantern – filling the spaces between and around the great symbols of "God-with-us," the communion elements. As we ponder this beautiful worship center, we are stirred beyond shallow expressions of "oh, isn't that nice," or "my, that is attractive." The Christmas symbols stir us much more deeply. We note that we don't just want to speak, we want to sing! We are re-awakened to the actuality, the reality of "God-with-us."

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We celebrate God's coming to us in the beautiful, yet commonplace things of life,--in friends who ask how our day is going, in the beauty of candles that give light, in music that buoys our spirit, in neighbors who greet us, in casual conversations that remind us we are not alone...in the ER, across the barnyard, in the grocery store, at Swiss Village or at the Wal-Mart cell-phone department! God-truly-with-us...the essence of our Christmas celebration.

“God-with-us...” (rereading of Isaiah 63:7-9) “I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us...according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love...and he became their savior in all their distress. *It was no messenger or angel but his presence that save them;* in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

A text which has become one of my favorites – these are the words which I share with families in those very hard moments prior to the beginning of a funeral service. We each know the difficulty of these minutes – what a great comfort – to know that in our distress...God doesn't “send” an apprentice or a mediator – but draws near to us with God's very own presence. Jesus – “God-with-us” – “the word become flesh dwelling among us.” As we prepare to begin a funeral service, *I* am strengthened and comforted by this promise – that God-is-with-us...

God-with-us, right now, right there...whether we feel it or not...

God's presence – from which nothing can separate us, “nothing in death or life, in things present, or in things to come, that is: nothing at all!

God's presence out of which – as the Gospel of John records - no one, no thing can “snatch us.”

A few weeks ago, Jan was leading worship – she invited us to look around at one another to see this dear community that we share with one another, a community of faith we which we recognize comes to us as a gift. This morning, we're delighted to share in worship and fellowship with family and friends – and there isn't anything else like it! We're very grateful for the technology which allows us to stay connected, but it isn't anything like being able to feel one another's real presence. At the same time, one of the mysteries of “belonging” to one another- knit together by the spirit of Christ -is that even

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when we aren't able to be physically together – that the prayers and loving thoughts which we share – offer nurture and support... offer “Presence.”

We treasure the gift of presence – in the many ways it comes to us...when we are able touch one another's hands, when our hearts stir within us with loving thoughts of those far from us and in relationships of memory which extend beyond this earthly life. The gift of God's presence truly “blesses the tie that binds.”

Presence – the gift of comfort. Comfort, something that seems difficult for some of us to ask for. Yet, comfort...that which peoples across the ages have longed for. The Prophet Isaiah's words are found in a beloved Advent hymn, “comfort, comfort ye, my people...” Comfort: the desire of a scared child, that which we long for no matter our age when we are sick, lonely or grieving. – No matter what stage in life we are in how we are comforted by the gift of gentle, loving presence – I remember Elizabeth Myers holding my hand while I was preparing to give birth to Alex. I was comforted by her presence.

I'm touched by the honesty of the little ones at Swiss Village Kinder Haus and the frail, old ones in health care. Just last week, I was stirred by this honest expression of human desire – on one short walk down the hallway: The bye-bye- buggy filled with the 1 year olds passed by the office where one of the children's mama was at her desk. Little arms came up with a cry...Mama went to reassure and to comfort. As I went down the hall, I came near to one of the *seemingly unaware* old women. Even though her eyes were shut, as I neared, her hand reached out for me and hung on tightly...

When we happily move through the reception line to greet newlyweds, when we stumble around with our words as we shake hands at the funeral home, we share the gift of presence. We strengthen one another, just by “being there.” Ben tells me of baby Blake's reaction when he goes to get him from his crib in the morning.... a little one full of squirms and smiles. This is the beauty of the Christmas story, the gift of Jesus among us-God-with-us!

Because of God's great gift of presence, we have this presence to share with one another. As followers of Jesus we are his body, the beloved community. We bear the Christ-light for one another – each of us, everyone of us – in a way that only each one of us can embody it...As we share the gift of presence with one another – we experience God-with-us!

Our Christmas packages have been opened. We have given and received symbols of our love for one another. Maybe we feel a bit of that gnawing post-holiday let down begin to stir. Yet, a greater gift lives within us, one which we are continuing to unwrap...the gift of presence – the love of God, the light of Christ which the darkness cannot overcome, from

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which nothing can separate us, from which we can't flee to far! (John 1, Romans 8, Psalm 139) It is ours to receive; it is ours to share! "Receive, rejoice, believe and follow!"

AMEN