



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **The Fourth Candle - Love**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**December 22, 2013**

All four candles are lit; hope, peace, joy, and now love. It's not like I don't already preach about love, in fact often enough to remind me of a favorite story from my friend Jim Lemler, who is the Rector at Christ Church, Greenwich. When he was the Dean of Seabury-Western Seminary and preparing for his weekly sermon to the community he was lamenting at the dinner table that he didn't know what he was going to preach. One of Jim's daughters, the middle one I think, gave him one of those eye-rolling looks and said, "I know what you'll preach...blah, blah, blah, love...blah, blah, blah, love. Well, here goes..."

I have to start with love as the conclusion of the Advent journey through hope, peace, joy and now love. The question that I've been asking myself is is love a product of hope, peace and joy or is it something else? Looking at the Advent wreath it's clear that it is a circle, and love is as much the beginning as the end. It is the alpha and omega. The First Letter of John says "God is love." love is before we came to be and is a potential within us. Love is not simply something that we are given or that someone feels for us - it is a state of being. Love is a command and it is hard work. Love is also the measuring stick for all that we do and think and feel. If we hold out the hope that our enemies will be undone, by love's measure, that's not hope, it is only hope is you want for your enemy what you want for yourself. If the peace that you envision is only peace for you, a freedom from want and worry that does not extend to everyone else, by love's measure it is not peace, it is indifference. If the joy you feel is one that celebrates that you are not the one who lost then by love's measure, it's not joy, it is fearful insecurity.

There are two components of love; love of self and love of others. Love of self is tricky because no one wants to be thought of as a self-absorbed egotist. But that's not what I mean by self-love. It is an acceptance of who you are and what you worth. It is the embrace of the human potential and capacity for creativity and beauty. A good way to understand self-love is through one of the deadly sins, sloth. Sloth is not laziness, but believing too little about oneself. Sloth refuses to see what we are capable of and so expects little. Sloth refuses to love our capacity. Healthy self love says, "I am from the Great Creator, how could I not be wondrous?"

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I often quote theologians, people with degrees from prestigious universities, writers of many important things. But they are not the only wise people around. I came across a video teaching on learning to love oneself as the first step toward spiritual enlightenment. The young woman, who reminds me of an elf from *The Lord of the Rings* and whose name is Teal, encourages people to begin a daily discipline of asking a simple question "what would someone who loves themselves do?" And then apply that question to all that you do. Would someone who loves himself, take up smoking? Would someone who loves herself, spend valuable time being angry, holding grudges? Would someone who loves himself, worry that he wasn't successful enough? Would someone who loved herself look in the mirror and hate what she sees? We cannot make any progress on our spiritual journey without learning what it looks like to love ourselves. The circumstances of our lives notwithstanding, we all deserve to be healthy, secure, warm, fulfilled, accepted, loved; but if the choices we make say that we don't believe that we have work to do. For Christians, we must always keep in mind that someone would and indeed has died for us and for his sake, if you can't find any other reason, love yourself. Not loving yourself belittles what he did. The challenge of self-love, and it is a huge challenge, is to listen to the answer to the question and then follow through on it.

People who love themselves can live boldly and dare greatly. They are not easily undone by hardship. Hardship doesn't take away their sense of self-worth. They know that they have a place in the larger picture. They can give freely and have a kinder view of the world and those who live in it. None of this adds up to a distorted ego or inflated sense of entitlement. It is confidence and serenity.

The ultimate goal of all spiritual work is unity with the divine. We talk about it as being of the same mind as Christ, abiding in God's love, being the Body of Christ. And it starts with self-love. You can't love all that God made without loving yourself. Once you love yourself, it is natural to extend it into love of others and indeed all of God's creation. This love is known by how it works in the world. It is compassion, kindness and justice. It requires awareness, awareness of how others are experiencing life and then the discernment for a loving response. The question here is how do I want for others, what I want for myself, and is there anything I can do about it?

Love overcomes habitual responses to life's challenging moments. It is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful. I think we've heard this somewhere. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends.

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Just as it is hard to learn to love ourselves, when we begin, we have to face all of our demons; it is equally hard to love what we have been taught to fear or disdain. Love embraces difference and does not judge it. We can respond to injustice in the world by helping keep the food pantry open on the Crow Reservation and help to build a school in Haiti. What we do not need to do is to fling judgment and disdain at those who perpetrate the injustice. We are called to love them as fiercely as the children we embrace. The way that love works, is that it breaks down walls and shines a light where there has been darkness.

The media is currently in Pope Francis frenzy and we all enjoy the stories and photos of him with children, embracing the disfigured, and sharing his birthday meal with the homeless in Rome. What is sad is that his behavior is a surprise to people, because it is nothing more than a believer following the example of Jesus and practicing love. This lovely man is shining a light on the failings of Christians to do this one simple thing - love each other. He is reminding us to love people more than money, to worry less about our own security and more about people who have none. He is reminding us that love brings us joy and it clears the path for peace. Love is why we have hope.

And what happens when this kind of love begins to grow in the world is that it creates joy, peace and hope.

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