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Paying attention during the best part of your life

Peg Ekerdt | Dec. 4, 2013 Spiritual Reflections
Advent 2013

Welcome to the quiet of December. Yes, you read that correctly, the quiet of December, at least at the parish office. As I encounter parishioners in this Advent season, they frequently say, "I know you are so busy." I often feel guilty when I rather halfheartedly agree. For in truth, once we get past Advent wreath-making on the first Advent Sunday, and the later-in-the-month birthday party for Jesus, there are fewer meetings, less programming (the presumption is people are too busy to come), and fewer emails and phone calls.

To be sure, there is still the work of pastoral care. And parish musicians have extra rehearsals. But the major Advent ministerial challenge is determining how to set up enough extra chairs for Christmas liturgies without violating the building's fire code and trying to create a sense of the holy in the midst of the bedlam that is the 4 p.m. Christmas Eve Mass.

I think that parishioners presume we on the parish staff are busy because their own lives feel out of control. What I am most aware of in these Advent weeks is the tension that our people experience in their attempt to make the Christmas holidays fulfill the wishes of children, the expectations of extended families, the hopes of retail merchants and marketers, and remain solvent throughout it all.

On a personal level, I become more attuned to what many of our folks must feel. I am married to a good man who chafes at the commercialism of Christmas. He is a tad like St. Francis in that he wants or needs little in the way of material goods. (On a day-to-day basis, if it weren't for his personal shopper -- me -- he might well end up naked in the town square like the saint of Assisi.) I, on the other hand, love the Christmas music, shopping, cards and gatherings. There is one more ingredient in this seasonal mix. We both know the prayerful watchfulness that Advent invites. But what is happening in our home each evening after work has more to do with Christmas hubbub than Advent prayer.

I think our parishioners live with the same conflicting expectations. They are faithful people who are focused on their families and their work. They are busy people. Some may have hearts of St. Francis themselves. But there are innumerable distractions to what matters most, and many find themselves in a tug of war as the church calls them to embrace Advent and the culture rushes pell-mell toward Christmas.

What then do I want to say to my parish family as Advent is upon us?

Some time ago I heard a trio of women who call themselves Red Molly sing a song written by Susan Werner. This is the first verse of the song "May I Suggest [1]":

> May I suggest to you
> May I suggest this is the best
> part of your life
> May I suggest
> This time is blessed for you

This time is blessed and
shining almost blinding
bright
Just turn your head
And you'll begin to see
The thousand reasons that
were just beyond your sight
The reasons why
Why I suggest to you
Why I suggest this is the best
part of your life

The first verse catches the theme that unfolds throughout. It is a message of mindfulness and of gratitude. No matter what is happening in our lives, this is the best part of life.

I have used this song on retreat with our eighth-grade students. I have seen it sung as a couple promised their lives to one another. And I have read an online tribute in which a woman wrote that she first heard the song as her husband was losing his battle with cancer: "It didn't seem possible that it could be the best part of my life. But I was lucky to have had him in my life and luckier still to have been there for and with him until the end. Every day can be the best part of your life. If you look for it."

Really, with so much to do ... this is the best part of my life? Yes, it is -- if we look for it. Is that not what Advent is really about? Looking for God, who became human and one with us in all the people and events of our days?

Be vigilant, the Advent Scriptures tell us. Prepare the way of the Lord. Conduct yourselves in ways pleasing to God. Share what you have. And live in the midst of busyness, and whatever else, as if this is the best part of your life.

Editor's note: Sign up for our Spiritual Reflections email alert to receive Scripture reflections throughout Advent and the rest of the year: Email alert sign-up[2].

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Links:
[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNqywS4TPw0
[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup
[3] http://www.celebrationpublications.org