

Third Sunday in Advent
13 December 2009
Pastor Craig M. Mueller

TO DO LIST

Many of us have enough challenges keeping up with our to-do-list throughout the year: e-mails to answer, tasks to accomplish, relationships to nurture. But the December to-do-list can put you over the top, if you're not careful. Maybe that's why the popular *Martha Stewart's Holiday To Do List* provides us a little comic relief. Every day of December has a task to accomplish, such as:

- December 1 – Blanch carcass from Thanksgiving turkey. Spray paint gold, turn upside down and use as a sleigh to hold Christmas cards.
- December 2 – Have Mormon Tabernacle Choir record outgoing Christmas message for answering machine.
- December 13 – Collect dentures. They make excellent pastry cutters, particularly for decorative pie crusts.
- December 19 – Adjust legs of chairs so each Christmas dinner guest will be the same height when sitting in their assigned seat.
- December 20 – Dip sheep and cows in egg whites and roll in confectioner's sugar to add a festive sparkle to the pasture.
- December 22 – Float votive candles in the toilet tank.
- December 25 – Bear son. Swaddle. Lay in color-coordinated manger scented with homemade potpourri.
- December 27 – Build snowman in exact likeness of God.
- December 31 – New Year's Eve! Give staff their resolutions.

In the grand scheme of things, much of what we fuss over this month causes undue stress and we lose perspective of what is truly important to us. At the same time, it seems like December is the month when people fall apart. There are such expectations put on the holidays. We have complex emotions regarding our memories and hopes. And for some, the experience of grief, or loneliness, or illness, or unemployment can make the very long days seem even darker. What's even more sad is that we often live in denial. Pretending that everything's okay and that it's the hap-hap-happiest time of the year.

Today's readings read like a to-do-list, a catalogue of short, pithy ways to live the faith. Though many think being Christian is about signing on to a system of beliefs, these texts give us a way of life.

Zephaniah's to-do-list is for a people in exile. His advice is simple: rejoice, sing and exult. For God is in your midst and is bringing you hope.

Paul's to-do-list for the church at Philippi includes well-known words for hard times. Rejoice. Be gentle with one another. Do not worry. Pour out your hearts to God and then rest in the peace that only God can give.

But it is in the gospel where things get down to the basics. The fiery preacher John the Baptist says it bluntly: Bear fruits worthy of repentance. In other words, change your lives. The people want specifics so they ask, "what then should we do? Give us our to-do-list." To the (presumably poor) crowds John simply says: "Share." To the tax collectors, "Be fair." To soldiers, "Don't bully."

Maybe these texts help make the point that though beliefs are part of what makes us Christian, it may be more helpful to use the word "practices" to describe our religious and spiritual lives. In a culture rampant with individualism, practices remind us of the communal, social quality of our lives and of our faith. These practices are a to-do-list we do as a community such as worship, healing ministries, contemplation, diversity and justice.

Our day-to-day practices may include things like reading scripture, meditation, yoga, journaling, spiritual direction, working with dreams, caring for our body, mind and spirit. And then there are service practices such as volunteering at a pantry or shelter, tutoring a child, visiting a shut-in.

Sometimes we make excuses why we don't join a community for worship. We don't believe anymore. Our heart isn't in it. We don't get anything out of it. We're too busy. At times like that, the top of the to-do-list could be: just show up. Engage in the practices. Worship. Sing. Serve.

I heard recently of a young woman who had tried to commit suicide and may try again. She didn't feel worthy to go to communion. But her pastor encouraged her to just get in line. To shuffle forward with everybody else who's doing the best they can, with their doubts and faults, their failures and tears. Sometimes we just show up for worship. And the hymns, prayers and rituals of the community carry us. And form us.

If we need to wait until we have enough faith or conviction or have done enough good deeds, we'll be waiting forever. Instead we simply show up. At church. In our families and relationships. In places of service. And the practices, the commitments, the actions change us and transform us.

We practice generosity not simply because we have so much and we can help people with little. Rather, we too are needy and we stand in solidarity with those suffering in a variety of ways. I read yesterday of a food pantry in New York where folks sometimes leave ridiculous offerings like cans of water chestnut and mandarin oranges, and bloody mary mix. Instead what they need is money to buy appropriate food. Many in this community volunteer or make donations for world hunger, refugees, the Lakeview Shelter and the Lakeview Pantry. At the same time, we know that it will take more than a check to change systems, to stand up to injustice and oppression. It will take more than recycling to address the growing issues of environmental justice and climate change. Our to-do-list challenges us to take action, to get involved, to stake our lives on things that matter.

Today we welcome seven new members to Holy Trinity. The questions that I will ask them are the to-do-list for all of us. They are the questions before us each time we affirm our baptism: *Will you gather with the community for worship? Will you serve others? Will you work for peace and justice in the earth?*

We respond not out of guilt or obligation, but out of gratitude for the precious gift of life. Perhaps awareness of this baptismal to-do-list may challenge, give perspective or redirection to our December to-do-list.

One last thing. For all the things we have yet to do--whether on our calendars or as a faith community--we are ultimately loved not for what we do, but for who we are: children of God. And as grace reminds us each Sunday at this table, you can't *do* anything about it. It's a gift! So how about putting that on the to-do-list for December 13: rejoice, do not worry, breathe in God's peace.