

In the Christian calendar, this is the time of advent, the beginning of the Christian liturgical year. The season of advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, the day of the birth of Jesus. This is a time of expectant waiting. It's a time of hopeful waiting for the birth of the savior and the second coming of Jesus as judge.

This morning I want to explore just what it is that is being awaited by Christians around the world. I want to explore this territory because I believe it has significant ramifications, significant importance for all of us, Christians and non-Christians alike.

I want to take us to the book of Galatians. A book in the new testament that is identified as a letter written by the apostle Paul, later known as St Paul. He was not one of the 12 disciples. He was born a Jew and was a Roman citizen, which gave him particular status during the first century. I focus on Paul because he is arguably, the most important of all the apostles, certainly one of the most influential.

He was committed to Judaism and the Roman Empire and was zealous in his hatred and persecution of the early followers of Jesus. But then, something happened... on the Road To Damascus, which was after the crucifixion of Jesus. The book of Acts 9:3-9, NIV, tells one of the stories of Paul's conversion.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" [Saul was his name before he became known as Paul]

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Following verses in Acts tell us that Ananias [an-e-a-us] heard Jesus tell him to go restore Paul's sight.

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel..."

This story is significant, because it demonstrates the power of Divine grace and God's willingness to use even a zealous hater of Christianity to advance Divine purposes. It is this conversion story that lays the groundwork for the theological distinction between righteousness based on Jewish law and righteousness based on the death of Christ. Augustine later elaborated on this distinction to help establish the theological doctrine of "by Faith Alone", which separates Protestantism from Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, which believe "good works" are also required for salvation, not faith alone.

Whether or not you define yourself as a Christian, whether or not you believe in miracles or Divine intervention, I want to talk to you about what Paul tells us comes from faith in God, acceptance of God into your life. I want to talk to you about these issues because I believe they represent virtues that we all would call good. They are virtues that benefit our culture and way of life. They are virtues that all Unitarian Universalists, of whatever ilk, can support. Regardless from whence they come, these are virtuous virtues. And we would do well to have them in our lives.

In the Book of Galatian, Paul identifies what he calls the Fruit of the Spirit (that's Spirit with a capital S). It was early in the development of Christianity. Paul had founded a number of churches, one of which was in Galatia. He learns that Jewish-Christian teachers are trying to influence his converts to follow, at least some, Jewish law; a direct challenge to Paul's view of the "truth of the gospel", and the beginning of a new age. These teachers were telling Paul's converts, who had previously been pagans, they should be circumcised and adhere to the Sabbath, and Jewish rituals and festivals.

Paul writes a letter to the Galatians. It was impassioned, some might describe it as a letter with scorched edges. The primary point he makes in this letter is that the only thing that counts, is "faith working through love." He tells his people that its all summed up in one commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself".

He says (5:22-23) "*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*" He goes on to say "*let us not become conceited, competing against one another....bear one another's burdens.*"

How can you argue with that? This is beautiful stuff, this is powerful stuff! Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Paul tells us, from a Christian perspective, these are gifts from God to those who believe.

Whether these gifts come from Almighty God, or they are gifts, virtues, that are embedded in the fiber of all humanity, or only available to the more enlightened of us, this is a wonderful list of attributes we should all seek. But alas, these virtuous words are not virtues until and unless they are made manifest, until they are felt, and lived. Until they actually have impact in the world.

Love, of the inherent worth of self, love of the inherent dignity of self and others, love of the vibrancy of life and openness to all that life has to offer, I believe, undergirds all the other Fruits mentioned. And love of this nature, I know from my own lived experience, is not always readily available to me. I know, from living my life, I do not often experience this kind of love in the world around me.

How many of us, how many of those you know well, can say, on a regular basis, we can find Joy in our lives, can find joyfulness, even in the face of sorrow? How many of us live in peace with ourselves, with others, with the way the world is at any given moment? How many of us are sufficiently patient to endure hardship, with love, joy and peace in our hearts?

Do we have access to enough kindness to be truly generous, especially to the poor, the homeless, the downtrodden, and those in whom we see extreme otherness? Do we have enough generosity to forgive those who have hurt us badly, abused us, or otherwise injured our psyches?

Are we sufficiently faithful to our foundational beliefs and values? Faithful enough to not despair over injustice or calamity in our lives, in the world at large? Can we find enough gentleness within ourselves to not express anger, hatred or vitriol? Do we live in a manner that exemplifies self-awareness and self-control?

I'm sure you know that I suspect the answers to these questions to generally be no. If I expected the answer to these questions to consistently be yes, I would not waste your time or mine, asking us to ponder, to reflect on these things. It seems to me, these things are largely out of our reach on an everyday basis. It seems to be the nature of being human.

And yet, yet, we should not hide behind the truth that things we wish for in our lives can often be hard to obtain. We should not let ourselves off the hook to do better, to be better. We should not stop holding ourselves to a standard of being better human beings.

It's for the very reason that we do not often see these virtues manifested in a single human being that we are compelled to take notice. Just days ago and even now, much of the world has stopped to take notice and to honor just such a human being.

Nelson Mandela was born in 1918, in South Africa. His father was the principle counselor to the acting King of his tribe. When his father died, he became a ward of the King and was groomed for leadership. Hearing stories of his ancestor's valor must have prompted his own dreams. He was not a good student and only obtained his law degree while he was in prison. He and Oliver Tambo started the first black law practice in South Africa.

As a lawyer, a political activist and as a guerrilla leader, he fought against white domination. In 1956 he was charged with treason, but was eventually acquitted after a 5 year trial. In 1964 he was charged with sabotage and spent 27 years in prison. Freed in 1990, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and was elected the first black president of South Africa in the first fully democratic election.

Mandela formed a Government of National Unity in efforts to defuse racial tensions, and instituted a new constitution. But what continues to amaze me the most about this great man was that he created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate human rights abuses.

Perhaps we only saw the public face of Nelson Mandela and maybe he wasn't so full of the Fruits of the Spirit as he appeared. But, to me, he will remain a hero and model of full human-hood, bearing the Fruits of the Spirit.

Let me close with his words. "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead." — Nelson Mandela