

“A Christmas Reflection”

(Rev. Bryan Olson)

- I. 1997 – Like most years – was filled with a mixture of joy and pain... celebration and sorrow
 - A. Entered that New Year grieving the loss of Evelyn... a great friend and neighbor
 - B. In May of 1997 I graduated from Luther College and was dreaming big dreams about what I was going to do with my life.
 - C. In September I finally found employment selling cell phones and pagers to businesses in Madison while working in Kohl’s shoe department on the weekends... not exactly the places I had been dreaming about just three months earlier.
 - D. Then in November, my grandmother Olson became seriously ill and died within two weeks of being admitted into a hospice facility.
 - 1) This was a soul crushing loss
 - 2) Seemed to exist in a world of shadows – everything seemed dull and gray
 - 3) In the days leading up to her funeral, I met with Pastor Louise (a former interim here at First Congregational UCC)
 - a) She told me that, when I miss my grandmother the most, I should light a candle to remember her spirit.
 - b) I followed her advice
 - 4) The night before my grandmother’s funeral I lit a candle in my room and stared into the light
 - a) If you ever look intently at the flame of a candle you will notice that there is, for lack of a better term, a “halo” of light that surrounds the flame itself. It is a part of the flame but also stands independent from it... it is light hovering above... and around.. and under the flame... dancing with it... but never quite touching it.
 - b) I believe this is where the Spirit of the light exists... and I believe it is where God exists in the light of our lives.
- II. December of 1997 was the first Christmas I ever celebrated without my grandmother.
 - A. Christmastime was always Grandma Olson’s favorite time of year
 - B. She loved making her special Swedish meatballs for Christmas Eve dinner and spoiling her grandchildren with many gifts on Christmas morning.
 - C. We knew celebrating Christmas was going to be difficult without grandma that year and I was in a very somber mood when I entered the sanctuary here at First Congregational on December 24, 1997.
 - 1) Earlier that year, Jean Jensen had on behalf of the church and asked if I would assist her in teaching her second grade Sunday school class.
 - 2) Initially I resisted the offer, but through God’s grace I eventually changed my mind. I had been working with Jean and the kids since October of that year...and we had recently finished a unit on the purpose of Advent and the true meaning of Christmas.
 - 3) When I entered the sanctuary on Christmas Eve 1997 I was greeted with the bright eyes, smiles, and hugs from two of my Sunday school students. In the briefest of moments I saw the light of Christ flash across their faces

and suddenly the shadows that had been darkening my mind and heart started to push away as a faint flicker of light appeared in my mind's eye.

- 4) That flicker grew into a small flame as friends and fellow disciples in the congregation came and greeted our entire family with compassionate greetings and Merry Christmas wishes.
- 5) And when the sanctuary grew dark and the faces of all God's people gathered in that place suddenly became a glow with the soft light of the candles they held... I was suddenly awash in the full and glorious light of Christ that John describes in his Gospel... the true light of the World was present... and the powers of darkness could not overcome it.
- 6) While others sang "Silent Night" around me, I stared intently into the candle alight in my hand... and from the light surrounding the flame I felt the Incarnate Love of God wrap around me and bring me... if only for the briefest of moments... into the full and glorious presence of our ever-living, ever-loving God.

III. Since that Christmas Eve over a decade ago, I have experienced many emotional hills and valleys in my life... as has our world.

- A. September 11th, 2001, was one of the darkest days in our nation's history. The tragic events of that day and many others have spawned a decade long war on terror, a severe economic recession, and a mistrust of neighbor and stranger that is perhaps unprecedented in human history.
- B. In these dark days we often try to find ways to manually brighten our world.
 - 1) Just down the road from our house in Yardley, PA, is one of the biggest holiday light displays I have ever seen. It encompasses nearly 7 acres of farm land and lights up the night sky for miles around.
 - 2) I have to admit it is a beautiful sight to see, but it pales in comparison to discovering the true Light of the World that resides in our very own hearts.
- C. This year let us share the light of Christ within us with the world... let us look for it constantly in the eyes of the people we love, the people we don't yet know, and even in the eyes of those we despise, mistrust, and hate.
- D. The good news of the Christmas message is that God's grace, hope, joy, peace, and love is given to all people freely and without condition. The Light of the World that God gives cannot be extinguished by fear, hatred, or even death. When times seem darkest in this coming year... and there will be some dark days ahead... remember to look for even the faintest glimmers of light in your life... for in them you will find God present and waiting to make you whole once again.