

Second Sunday of Advent

Two strangers had a brief conversation just before we all got off a plane this week. I overheard the woman ask the man, “Are you from Dallas?” which is where the flight originated. “No,” he said, “Kansas City,” which is where we had just landed. “How about you?” he asked. She said, “I’m from Kansas City too. I was in Dallas for a funeral.” He said, “I make this trip quite a bit,” and then they started off the plane. I immediately thought that if she were having this conversation with me and said the word “funeral”, my next words would have been, “Oh, I’m sorry. Did you lose someone in your family?” Or something like that. I would have commented next about the funeral, not about the flight.

At least, I hope that’s what I would have done. Sometimes when you’re in a conversation, people drop a clue that they want to talk about something of value. I try to listen for those clues, but I’m sure that sometimes I don’t catch them. Or I do, and don’t follow up on them because I’m too tired or too worried about where that conversation will go. One way to increase love for someone else is to develop perception for what they are really saying.

St. Paul tells the Philippians today that he is praying that their love “may increase ever more and more in knowledge and in every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” Last week we heard Paul say something similar to the Thessalonians. Here again, he is trying to help the community increase in love so that they will be blameless when Christ returns. Today Paul stresses that an increase of love can come from knowledge and perception, from taking the time to listen to a person, to hear the clues they are dropping, to respond to their concerns. Advent is helping us prepare for what Paul calls “the day of Christ,” the day when Christ will come to judge, as surely as he once came in the flesh. We want to be blameless on that day, and one way is to increase our love.

Pope Francis has designated the upcoming year as a special jubilee Year of Mercy. Traditionally we have a Holy Year in the Catholic Church every 25 years, the last one being the year 2000. But some popes have declared additional or “extraordinary” holy years. Pope Francis believes this is the time for us to increase mercy. He hopes that this year will help us find alternatives to the atrocities, cruelty and exploitation of our world today. He also hopes it will encourage more tender, tolerant and patient relationships between individuals. The holy year begins this coming Tuesday, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, a holyday of obligation. Tuesday also marks the 50th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council. The council repositioned the Catholic Church as a people of mercy. You could say that the council tried to fulfill what St. Paul hoped the Philippians would do, increase in love through the virtues of knowledge and perception.

As we continue this Advent season of preparation, let us look for ways to be more loving to those around us, especially those in our homes, at school, at work, and on the streets. Let’s listen for clues that tell us what is of value to others, and help them experience mercy, that we all may be pure and blameless on the day of Christ.