

Sermon July 24, 2011 John 1, 1-4, Christmas in July, Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO 80222

Why Christmas in July? Norma Hansen expressed it best last week when she said, “We can celebrate Christmas without all the hurry, trappings, and busyness.” So true.

You and I get caught up so easily in the busyness of our lives that we fail to take time to notice things around us. Pausing, I have come now to believe, is a spiritual discipline that creates opportunities to spend time with God and with our loved ones. For example, last Friday, my wife, Laura and I had a date! We visited the Denver Art Museum and enjoyed the exhibit titled “Mud” and a quiet, relaxing lunch. The pause was one in which we spent time with each other, our beloved. We also can understand the necessity of the Creation story in Genesis in which God rested after creation. The Sabbath is a time for us to spend time with our Beloved, with God. Sunday is a time for us to slow down and recall that all that we have received is a gift.

It is in this pausing that we are able to see the wisdom of the Creator and the gifts bestowed to us. The different writers of the Gospels see the gift of Jesus in different ways. In the Gospel of Mark, the identity of Jesus is revealed on the cross, when the centurion exclaimed, “Clearly this man was God’s Son.” (Mark 15:39). Matthew’s identity is at his baptism (Matthew 3: 12; Mark 1: 11) when the voice from heaven declared “You are my Son, the Beloved.” In Luke the identity is announced at his birth by the angels to the shepherds, (Luke 2: 11) to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah.” In this Gospel of John, the Creation story includes the Creation of the all of us, and of Jesus. It provides the identity of Jesus as was experienced by the disciples. The writer is trying to set forward in simple language what had been experienced by the disciples’ encounter with Jesus. It is the “Word” that was with and was God and “became flesh and lives among us in Jesus.”

So how is it that you and I come to celebrate this gift at this time in the midst of July? Another way of asking this same question is “Where do we see the movement of God in our lives? Or “Where is the Spirit of Christ meeting you in your daily living?”

Lori Carroll’s Wednesday evening discussion on the book “Practicing Resurrection” she spoke of the work of Grace in the life of the church at Ephesus. Paul encouraged the people to relate to each other as you relate to God.

We all have relationships. The church is built on relationships with each other and with God. The definition for the work of the church I use is from H. Richard Niebuhr’s book, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church” in which he says the purpose of the church is “to increase the love of God and the love of neighbor.”

So often we understand this to be external....we are to increase the love of God by increasing the size of the church, and to increase the love of neighbor by doing more mission work. I’d like us to rethink that and make a paradigm shift, a major shift from outside to inside. For I see the work of God in the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, as a major paradigm shift from external to internal. Jesus’ saving work is that of providing a return to the original relationship our Creator intended, a relationship based on as Martin Buber, the great Jewish Theologian wrote an I-Thou instead of an I-It

God desires, God in the work of the Creation, God wants relationship. We want relationship too.

So, how is this done? By Pausing and spending time within ourselves, with ourselves, with our friends, lovers, spouses, significant others, and with our Creator, with God.

Terry Hershey, a clergyperson, and now Christian spiritual leader, tells the story of the late President Dwight D. Eisenhower. A major meeting was taking place and the President said after an hour: "This meeting is over. I have a meeting with my grandson for football." Others expressed concern and gave reasons why they needed to continue. The President responded: "I don't have a reason to give to my grandson of why I missed playing football with him." He said "No" to this meeting and said "yes" to his grandson.

All of us have these choices to make within our lives. We choose on one side to be busy with our I phones and I pads, computers, networking, our work, schedules, meetings. But we have a second side: of stepping aside and entering into the quiet, of time with family, friends, listening, silence, God. It is time for refreshment...you know, Miller Time, that time to sit down, have a sip of beer, and simply enjoy whatever it is that you feel call to pause and refresh.

As we look at the Jesus story, it is about that pause, that two sided part of who we are: the inner and outer life, the work increasing the love of God and of neighbor. But Jesus saw, modeled and taught that this includes ourselves as well. This is the story of Jesus, each told in a different way by the Gospel writers. For example, Mark has Jesus "immediately" doing things, moving and acting. If you read this Gospel, you will become exhausted. The story of Jesus, the Christmas in July movement I'm encouraging is one that reflects the Jesus who took time, and a lot of it, not just to be in prayer, but to enjoy those things most...relationships and the wholeness, and balance that we are to have and that God wants for each one of us.

A closing story that will encourage us this week: from Terry Hershey's workshop on Pausing.

Dad," the six-year old boy asks his father, "How much money do you make an hour?"

"Son," the father, short on patience from a long work week, answers, "that is an inappropriate question. You need to learn to be polite. There are certain questions you never ask people."

"Okay," the boy responds.

Seeing his son's demeanor, the father softens, and says, "Okay, I'll tell you. I make \$50 an hour."

The boy smiles. "Then, Dad, can I borrow \$10?"

The father bristles, his exasperation no longer restrained, "You've gone over the edge. First you ask an inappropriate question, and now you need money. Can you at least tell me what it's for?"

"Oh yes," answers the son, brightly, "With \$10, I will have \$50 in my piggy bank. And I was wondering if I could buy an hour of your time?"

Look at your life, consider the Christmas story, and spend time with the one who loves you regardless of who you are or where you are on life's journey. Just sit, relax and "BE." Amen.