

Traditionally, this second Sunday of Advent is known as Peace Sunday. Last Sunday was Hope. This Sunday allows us to anticipate a different time than now, a time when Peace will prevail over all that perverts the gladness which God would have us experience.

But, there are the enemies of Peace that keep us from becoming the persons God made us to be. And those enemies of Peace may not be what normally comes to mind when we think of enemies.

Our youngest areas of the child care center have those one way windows in the downstairs hallway where I often take a few moments to watch them playing, or eating, or napping, or crying. Looking through those windows all I see is a group of kids. For toddlers there is an equal amount of promise in all of them - they can still do and be anything.

So what is it that transforms a carefree toddler, who loves to swing or build with Legos, or dig in the dirt into a drug dealer, or an armed robber, or a spouse beater, or a white collar criminal? What happens in their lives that molds them into characters of renown or tyrants of terror? Even in the same household siblings can end up so different.

One enemy we can admit to is the Enemy of Poverty: Children are the largest single group claiming residency below the poverty line. Prior to 1974 it was the seniors of our society who held that distinction. But beginning then, advocacy and political organizing brought the number of impoverished seniors down. Meanwhile, the poverty numbers for the young have remained the same and now, are at the highest

Statistics vary, but a reasonable estimate suggests that one-quarter of all the children in the United States go to bed hungry each night. It is hard to dream while your stomach is growling. Bad nutrition turns playing hard into hardly playing. Lack of proper medical care and preventive inoculations let diseases we thought were long gone sneak in the back door and devour our children.

Two groups of people have been in front of us this past week – those falling off the unemployment insurance and those who are millionaires. Congress has been disputing over the needs of these two groups all week and has successfully bogged itself down, unable to move ahead with meaningful legislation.

The numbers in question are:

2,000,000 falling off unemployment insurance

2,886,200 the number of households in the United States making more than \$1million per year.

The issue being that some have held up extension of the unemployment benefits for 2,000,000 people because there are legislators who believe that 2,886,200 people, making a million dollars or more, should retain their tax breaks (about \$46,000 in taxes for a million dollars). Obviously, represented here are many persons making far more than \$1,000,000.

But, I ask you, where is the Enemy of Poverty harbored in these statistics?

The second enemy is The Enemy of Fear: Children are not naturally very fearful. Ask any parent who has both a toddler and a steep set of stairs in the house. Linda was never satisfied with my quip "they'll only fall down the steps once" whenever she would panic when the kids would go racing towards the stairs.

Natural fearlessness makes children explore their environment, try out new challenges, giggle and laugh when held up high to the ceiling and enables them to learn their world.

But there are many fears that can be so easily instilled. Fear of rejection. Fear of humiliation. Fear of violence. Fear of failure. And we teach these to our children a little bit day by day.

Don't try to run up and hug Daddy when he's got his "mad face" on - he'll just push you away.

Don't ask questions because Mommy will say "What, are you stupid?"

Don't admit to being scared or lonely or sad because you're supposed to be a "big boy" or "big girl" now.

Children learn a lot about fear in front of the television, the computer, and their cell phones.

And then there is The Enemy of Hate. Children are not angels. They can be cruel, nasty, and mean - but hatred is a more refined skill that must be learned at the feet of a master.

Children are taught to hate people because of how they talk, hate a race because of how they look, hate the rich because you're poor, hate the poor because you're rich, hate peace because your life is not peaceful.

Hate, in turn, supports the whole structure of violence. What most of us personally know about the Taliban we could write on the back of an envelope and yet we have been at war with them for eight years. And from the sounds of things we better start boning up on the Iranians and North Koreans.

Hatred can be so blinding. I was amazed to hear someone argue on a news talk show that they could not think of a terrorist who was not of middle east descent. How could they forget that just a little over fifteen years ago, on April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City testified to the violent legacy begotten by hate. And, in that federal building was a day-care center where children were blown up while they were still innocent of hate.

Perhaps the greatest fear we grow up with is the survival of the fittest fear. Clearly, we have all been raised with the sense that the one with the most toys wins. Among friends and colleagues and neighbors there are all sorts of competitions. The one who gets the job promotion, the pay increase, the bigger house, the better grade, the most icing -- all are ways of measuring one's status against another's.

We live in fear that we won't have enough and that there won't be enough to take care of us when we are old. Even Pharaoh had stuff buried with him that he would never be able to use but the treasures and the slaves were there just in case.

If Peace is to prevail in this or any Advent season we need to consider what is the end result of all this competition. By the law of the Survival of the Fittest the children of each succeeding generation should have a leg up. Survival of the fittest would imply that the community, the state, the nation where children

are being sufficiently cared for would be setting a course where every child is encouraged and supported to succeed.

But such is not the case. There is no Peace to be found. It is accepted that the one with the most toys wins -- case closed.

But people of faith do not let this notion go on without being challenged. In the "natural order" the fittest of the species makes its way to the top by tramping down the weak, the infirm, the inferior, those with a defect, by culling the herd.

And we have seen that notion at its worst. When the Nazi's rounded up those it considered inferior and shipped them off to work camps where they were transformed into work animals, where they were systematically killed slowly by starvation or quickly by gas chambers and crematoria. The Nazis held on to a notion that the Arian race was superior to all others and that they should triumph. They should rule. They should win.

But people of faith know that this interpretation of the survival of the fittest does not have God's blessing. Instead of one group being superior to all others, people of faith know that it is God's intent that vast sharing on the part of those who have is expected to support those who have not.

Those who suggest otherwise are not reading or understanding the full meaning of Christ's gospel. They are not paying attention to the story of the one crying in the wilderness -- calling people to repent and to make a way for the one coming in God's name.

They are not paying attention to the one crying in a manger signaling God's greatest move to get our attention. They are not listening to the one hanging on the cross as a sign of the ultimate forgiveness for our sinful ways and a call to change. To those who are willing to accept and even create a world divided between a minute minority of the powerful and the vast majority who have no say in the day to day dreaming of what the world can become.

The Advent season lets us proclaim loudly each year, "No!" We trust that there is a promise-keeper among us and it is the power of that one kept promise which can renew the childlike promise of life and love that was present in each of us at birth.

John the Baptist proclaims the promise - "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." As John the Baptist faithfully preached the approach of the Messiah, God kept God's promise to John and to all the generations since.

At Christmastime, we rejoice that God kept God's promise and sent to earth the Messiah. The birth of the Christ child embodies the promise contained in all children everywhere and the life of Jesus testifies to the possibility of an adult life made rich with the fulfillment of those promises.

John the Baptist ridiculed the Pharisees and Sadducees as they approached him for baptism because he perceived the hypocrisy and saw through the hollowness of their promise to repent. Both groups hated each other but their fear of what commotion John was able to stir up united them to work together to make sure John would not succeed.

John demanded of them "fruits of repentance" in order to validate the promise they would commit to that day in the Jordan River.

At the moment of his birth, Jesus represented the greatest promise God had ever made with creation - the promise of redemption. Jesus, too, was called to bear fruit worthy of this promise as he lived his life on earth. But Jesus kept the promise when he was hung on a cross by those who claimed to be the fittest and they mocked the one who was deemed to be without any power in the end. Jesus appeared to be alone and abandoned for our sake. God fulfilled all promises when God raised Jesus from death to eternal life.

"The Boy and the Creche" is the true story of what happened one Christmas Eve in front of the Holy Trinity Episcopalian Church in New York City. The story is told by the Reverend Clarke Kimberly Oler, who was pastor at the time.

Oler says that a street urchin, barely 6 years old, showed up at the Nativity scene on Christmas Eve. He had been around before but had always run off when approached. The streets at this time of night were deserted. The little boy peered at the life-sized figures and stared at the manger.

Then, suddenly, he climbed inside and curled up in the straw.

Oler writes that "I felt as though I had been granted a momentary look into a lonely child's heart . All I could do was breathe a prayer that somehow he had been comforted by Mary's unchanging expression of love."

The promise of love, of life eternal, of the divine fulfillment of all our longings and desires, is offered anew to us this season.

Just as our Nativity scenes and creches are set out each year, so the promise that the baby Jesus embodies is reaffirmed every Christmas. But, what may be needed is for us to allow the little child in each of us to curl up in the straw and allow our spirits to be comforted and renewed by the hope, peace, joy and love that are given to us by God in the coming of the Christ child. And with that sense of comfort let us commit ourselves to be the people who are committed to making sure that no child is going to suffer needlessly because the well off claimed to be more worthy. Amen.