

## CHRISTMAS EVE MEDITATION

Luke 2:1-20

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2020  
(online worship only)

The actor Michael J. Fox was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson's disease in 1991, when he was 29 years old. He has just published a memoir entitled, No Time Like the Future: An Optimist Considers Mortality. I heard him interviewed this week about his book, and his life. He talked about what it was like to be diagnosed at age 29 and to head home and tell his wife the news. They'd been married two years and had a young child. His wife, Tracey Pollan, didn't flinch and their relationship has remained strong. This is what he told interviewer Terry Gross about his wife's support of him. He says, "She can't feel my pain, but she acknowledges it." She acknowledges it.

By that he doesn't mean, merely, "My wife knows I have a disease, and she has learned about it." What he means is this. His wife really KNOWS him. She has spent intentional mindful time with him, she has deeply listened as he has talked about what it's like to live with Parkinson's Disease. Because she is present with him, he is not alone. She can't feel what he feels, but because she has not looked away, she has let him know that he is seen and known.

You see the word "know" in the word "acknowledge". To be acknowledged is to be known, to be seen, to be heard.

Is there any greater gift we can give another person than to really know them? I can't think of a better way to describe love when it is at its best.

When your love for someone is at its best, you become a good listener; you stay alert for cues and clues about how your loved one is feeling. If you've ever cared for a

baby, you know this kind of love. An infant can't tell you in words what she needs, so you have to pay close attention. What does that kind of cry or that kind of whimper mean?

What if we were to listen to our children that closely and attentively no matter what age they are? What might we learn about their inner life? Would our children feel acknowledged? Seen and heard and known?

If it has happened to you, that someone has listened to you deeply, paid close attention to you, asked you questions that show the depth of their caring, then you know you have been acknowledged and loved.

I hope that as you look back on 2020, you remember some moments of joy and laughter; I know I have some very pleasant memories of ordinary days and also celebrations. But let's face it, what we will mostly remember, collectively, about 2020 is the pain of it. We will remember the fear, the worry, the losses, the misunderstandings and arguments.

I wonder how the year would have been different if we had all learned to love one another better.

What do we do about all the pain we see in the world, all the pain in our own lives? Megan Devine is a therapist and researcher who studies intense pain and loss - like the loss of infants, and deaths due to violent crimes, accidents, suicides and natural disasters. Here's what she's learned. Cheering people up, telling them to be strong, encouraging them to move on - it is all well-intentioned, but it doesn't actually work. It seems counterintuitive, but it's proven that the way to help someone is to let them be in pain but still be close to them. This is true for giant losses and the ordinary everyday ones.

As the educator Parker Palmer writes, "The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed, exactly as it is."

It's called acknowledgment. Acknowledgment makes things better even when they can't be made right.

Devine goes on to say, "You can't heal someone's pain by trying to take it away from them. When we try to take away someone's pain it can only make the grieving person feel more alone."

When someone tells you something painful, she recommends that you say, 'I'm sorry that's happening. Do you want to tell me about it?' Because being heard helps. It seems too simple but acknowledgment can be the best medicine we have. It makes things better even if they can't be made right.

I spent a lot of my time this year counseling people who experienced family conflict. After the killing of George Floyd on Memorial Day weekend, our nation's divisions grew more pronounced. I began hearing from church members who were protesting his killing and other similar killings. I began hearing from church members who were afraid because of the violence that sometimes erupted at protests. And I began hearing from people who had family members in both of those groups.

I wonder what would have happened if we could have practiced acknowledgment? I will never be able to feel the very same way that the parents of black children in this country feel. I will never be able to experience what it feels like to be a police officer in this country. But I can try to acknowledge them, both of them. I can listen and not turn away when the parent of a black ten-year-old decides that this is the time they must begin talking to their child about the dangers they may face out in the world. I can look at a police officer and see not just a uniform but a person with a story and a family. I can stop myself from making assumptions and I can instead choose to learn with an open heart. To see. To hear and listen. To know.

This is acknowledgment, this is radical empathy, this is love. It's not just for our family members, not just for people with whom we are intimate. We are called to witness one another, to see every single person as a person with value, with a story.

How would 2020 have been a better year if we had found a way to acknowledge the lives of our health care providers, to see them as real people, each with loved ones, each with feelings, each with their own dreams as well as their own pain?

When you read through the gospel stories, you find example after example of Jesus' acknowledging people. He sees women and children as people, when legally they were considered property and often treated as things to be used. He acknowledges the woman at the well, stunning her with the news that he knows all about her life and her mistakes. He sees her; he loves and accepts her. No peasant would ever talk to a tax collector; they were the enemy of the people. But Jesus acknowledges that Zacchaeus is a human being; he calls him by name and shares a meal with him. He sees the blind beggar, the person with leprosy; he thinks about what life is like for a fisherman. He listens to people, he knows them. Their lives have meaning and value in his eyes.

The story of Christmas is called the incarnation - God choosing to become flesh, to become one of us, to walk this earth as a human being, to really know what our lives are like. It is the ultimate act of acknowledgment, of radical empathy. The ultimate act of love.

Imagine for a moment that God knows what YOUR life is really like. That God knows how you have struggled this year to keep peace in your family when one person is a nurse and one person jokes about wearing masks. Imagine for a moment that God really knows how hard it is has been for you to try to care for others when you have felt so tired and disheartened yourself sometimes. God knows you grieve the loved ones you're missing right now - and you're missing being in this room tonight.

God acknowledges you. You are known. You are seen and heard. You are loved. And that love has the power to light this weary world. God love you. You are beloved.

God knows. God knows we will sometimes be in pain but we will never be alone. God sees the places in you where you harbor shame, guilt, regret. God sees the wounds that haven't healed. God sees how hard you try to show love and forgiveness to people you honestly don't always like very much. God acknowledges you in your innermost being. God loves you. You are beloved.

God enters our world because God loves us. I pray that tonight you can lean into that love, feel it catch you and hold you secure. There is nothing that can ever separate us from that love. It has the power to transform everything. It is the light that nothing can ever extinguish. Thanks be to God.