

No Time To Stifle Ourselves

Many will know of the 1970's television series, *All In The Family*. The two main characters were Archie Bunker and his wife Edith Bunker. Archie was a crusty, unfiltered blue-collar guy who expressed opinions on race, religion and other social topics in a way that would make people cringe today. Edith, though sometimes ditsy and confused, could take on Archie with surprising wisdom and strength. When Archie didn't like what he heard from Edith, he would dismiss her with a brusque "Stifle yourself, Edith!"

Edith didn't always stifle herself. When Archie challenged her most deeply held thoughts and feelings, she let him know he had finally crossed a line and pushed him back into his place.

The Third Sunday of Advent has traditionally been called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word for rejoice. In the past when our observance of Advent was more akin to a Lenten discipline, this Sunday was a time to take a breather and celebrate the nearness of Christmas. The scripture selections for this Sunday still reflect the theme of rejoicing, calling us to "rejoice heartily in the Lord."

Henri Nouwen wrote of joy as an internal orientation that is not dependent on external circumstances, whether they are good or bad. Joy is rooted in the sense of unconditional love—love that comes from God and is experienced in those around us.

Joy requires confidence and trust that this love is real, reliable and never ending. Reflecting more deeply on the scriptures for the Third Sunday of Advent, we see Isaiah's confidence at work as he describes his sense of purpose: to bring glad tidings to the poor, heal the brokenhearted and bring release to prisoners. This confidence is rooted in his relationship with God, in what he calls, "the joy of my soul." Similarly, John the Baptizer knows his place in relationship to Jesus, he says: "I am not the Messiah ... I am a voice in the desert crying out: Make straight the way of the Lord!" Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to live from a sense of joy because God's love for them has been expressed in Christ Jesus.

This week of Advent is less about seeing Christmas near at hand, and more about renewing our sense of purpose and our unique place in the unfolding process of bringing about God's reign. The work continues and we have a part to play.

We experience pressure from many sources that tell us to stifle ourselves, sometimes draining energy from our unique mission as a health ministry and our own sense of purpose as individuals.

The confidence of Isaiah, Paul and John in their relationship with God and purpose in the world models what a deeply held conviction can do for us.

This week of Advent may be a time for us to guard carefully against those influences that would tell us to “stifle ourselves.” Like Edith Bunker, may we find the right time and place to draw the line. May the examples of Isaiah, Paul and John give us the wisdom to know when that is.