Christmas and New Year Letter from the Pastor

December 30, 2016

Dear Fairview Friends,

 As 2016 draws to a close and we meditate on what we have experienced this Christmas and the beginning of the new church year, I would like to invite us all to consider how we can best pray that the Lord's kingdom come and the Lord's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

 When we look around, we see a world that is torn by serious strife, a world that is dancing on the brink of significant crisis. This could be a terrible development, but it could also be a great gift and opportunity for us to reflect and to act. What is the cause of the division and violence in the world today? Without a doubt, there are numerous intricate historical circumstances that have led us to where we are today—an increasingly secular and hostile environment, education systems fraught with problems, inept governments, failed foreign policies, corporate greed, radicals with violent methods, a populace often deceived by hateful propaganda or empty intellectual trickery, churches suffering from apathy, a citizenry that is drugged by its own self-interest and entertainment. The list could go on, but it would never address the heart of the matter. The world needs salvation and needs a Saviour, but on our own we do not possess salvation and we are not its saviours. There are not enough guns, pharmaceuticals, technological innovations, ecological practices, petitions, demonstrations, elections, policies, offices, ideologies, philosophies, interpretations, implementations, organizations, businesses, heroes or heroines to save the world. The more we think that we can save the world, the more we damage it. The more we see ourselves as saviours, the more we are lost and far from salvation. The more we follow the course of the world, the more we become alienated from it and harm it. This is the paradox—to really love the world is to *love not the world* (John 3, 1 John 2). In loving Christ first, we love the world as it ought to be loved, in an honest and salvific love that heals. The only salvation this world will ever see comes from the Saviour Jesus. All confusion and strife stems from sinfulness, from the rebellion of humanity against the love and wisdom of God. At the end of the day, we need to take seriously the words of the apostle: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). In other words, the problems out there are not merely the fault of the government agency we despise or the foreign policy that enrages us—the problems out there are because of you and me. Thus, the apostle Peter says, "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God" (1 Peter 4:17). This is not a very popular diagnosis, perhaps, but it is the one that actually leads to hope. One of the great benefits of Christianity is that it liberates us to the degree that we can take responsibility for our failings *and repent*. To truly repent is to embrace freedom because God's salvation is ever present for those who turn to Him. To be a Christian is to say no to scapegoating, to admit that we are no different from those we oppose (in some ways), to take stock of what we are doing, and to turn back to the will of God and the grace of God.

 Thus, instead of remaining in lament and confusion, let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and to the work of the Spirit in our individual lives and in the world. First, it must begin in our individual lives. All of us have been called to be priests (1 Peter 2:8-10), and as such, we ought to examine ourselves and our priestly mission (1 Corinthians 11:28, Galatians 6:4, 2 Corinthians 13:4-9). In examining ourselves, we may see if, by the light of grace, we are indeed following the footsteps of our Lord. If we do not know where we are going, how will we address what takes place around us? Jesus warned of the danger inherent in this disposition: "If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14). There are a number of questions we can ask ourselves as we approach the New Year:

1) In what way have I not heard the word of God, lived out the word of God, or conformed to the word of Christ in my walk of faith? (James 1:5-7, Matthew 7:13-29, John 14:1-26).

2) In what way have I resisted, tested or grieved the Holy Spirit? (Acts 5:1-11, Acts 7:51, Acts 26:14, Ephesians 4:30)

3) Am I ready to meet the Lord today? (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 24:42-44, Matthew 25)

4) Am I abiding in the Lord? Do I have a real personal relationship with Jesus through faith in His grace? (John 15)

5) Am I seeking first the Kingdom and its righteousness? (Matthew 6)

6) Am I living the Beatitudes and producing the fruits of the Spirit? (Matthew 5, Luke 12, Galatians 5?)

7) Am I confessing Jesus before others? (Matthew 10:32, Luke 12:8)

8) Am I present to my brothers and sisters, to strangers, to others in general, so that I may be present to Christ? (Matthew 18:20, Hebrews 10:25, Galatians 6:10, Matthew 25:31-46)

9) Am I praying? (Matthew 6:5-15, 1 Corinthians 14:15, Luke 18:1-8, James 5:13-16, Colossians 4:2, Romans 12:12, 1 Timothy 2:8, Psalm 134:2)

10) Am I aware of how much Jesus loves me? (John 3, John 15, 17, Romans 8)

 All of these areas of introspection can be summarized simply in the following questions: Am I really following Jesus? Is Jesus Lord and Saviour of my life? Is Jesus my first and foremost love? (Revelation 2:4). This is not an invitation to self-recrimination, self-condemnation, scruples, or doubting the grace of God. This is an invitation to deeply and richly perceive what God can do in our lives so that we can, having been filled with His light, turn to the darkness of the world and share the light that is in us. Once we have taken time to think through these questions, we need to turn to God and honestly ask for help. This is not a journey we make on our own. If we made it on our own, then we would not be walking with Jesus, and we would be heading nowhere. The good news is that Jesus is more than willing to help us on our way, for Jesus is the way, the truth and the life! (John 14:6). Moreover, it is God's desire to see us thrive in His love and grace, but we must be honest and ready to receive His healing, his working in our hearts and souls.

 As I said at Christmas time, the greatest gift of the season, of all seasons, is Jesus Himself. And it is Jesus who spoke ardently of how much God desires to give to us: "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.  Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”(Luke 11:9-13). And as the Risen Jesus said to his disciples: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

 May the Lord bless all of you in 2017 with new opportunities for growth, service and for experiencing the love of God. The world needs you because you bear the Saviour within you. My thanks to God for all of you, for your presence, for your kind hearts, your giving, your working and your testifying to the grace of God. May the Holy Spirit continue to convict you, heal you, strengthen you and uplift you as you run without growing weary, as you soar up on the wings of eagles in His Holy Name!

Happy 2017!!!

Blessings in Christ,

Stephen Hasbrouck