

I've been moved by the depth and breadth of conversations that the Advent book discussion group has had over the past few weeks. Perhaps the timing was right. Perhaps the end to an exhausting year left us ready to share. Perhaps the book lent itself to open up such discussion. (Regardless of its role in our discussions, [*Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Henri J.M. Nouwen*](#) is well worth the read and extremely easy to access.) Whatever the reasons, the insights and connections have been profound and provide food for thought after each session. Those participating have been blessed.

A few of the insights I thought were worthy to share, and, perhaps, they will resonate with you. The first observation was almost a throw away line at the end of one of the meetings. As we were winding up the discussion, a participant noted that this year she knew, in a way that she had never appreciated, what the longing and hoping and anticipation of Advent were about. I suppose we get so used to our rhythms and rituals that we sometimes lose the undergirding reality that they seek to illumine. Indeed, those rhythms and rituals--while critically important to exposing us to truths in our lives and the reality of life--can sometimes insulate us from the very things that they are meant to reveal to us. Of course, life has a very troubling way of shattering our bubbles and forcing us to confront what we may not want to or could not consider. It is an understatement, that this year has forced us to do such reckoning. However, rather than an unpleasant task, I heard the renewed appreciation for the awareness of the themes of Advent as those things which enhanced and enriched life.

Another perspective centered around the issue of giving thanks. In a year when we throw our hands up on an almost daily basis, one can imagine that thanksgiving might take a back seat to lament (or something worse!). Yet, for many in the meeting, the difficulties of the year revealed in an even more pronounced way the very things that we could be and should be thankful for. Friends, family, work, groceries, health were the obvious items that quite easily and quickly rolled off the tongue. However, the group began to dig down more deeply to unearth the hidden artifacts of opportunities for thanks that were newly excavated. Noticing the miniscule changes of the seasons, a particular word of encouragement or support in a most unexpected moment, the awareness of the gestalt of the forest on a random hike, the blessing of a favorite coffee cup that serves it up but also can be an opportunity for thanks. Indeed, one individual who tracks moments of thanks noted the jar that holds the paper scraps bearing the object of thanks overflowed this year in a way it never had.

Finally, our discussion around Nouwen's firm commitment that we are *the beloved of God* was truly fascinating. I suspect that for many organized religion is more about guilt and shame--controlling people--rather than about grace and unconditional acceptance and love. And, clearly for some, the unconditional acceptance and love was not something that they were used to. However, internalizing that message--*you are the beloved of God*--possesses profound impact and import for how we see ourselves and for how we see others. We--and they--are the

beloved. And moving out into the world from that place of groundedness in love allows us to live into the better versions of ourselves. No doubt.

I know that this year has been tough, and contemplating Christmas in the way that we will observe it seems so bizarrely surreal. I hope, however, that we may take some of the lessons learned about ourselves and our community with us beyond the pandemic. We are stronger, wiser, and more compassionate if we do. I also hope that we continue to find creative ways to engage and connect with one another. If nothing else, the desire to connect has been highlighted in this year. The ways that we do such connecting will never be exhausted. Finally, I hope that we can continue to live out of a place of deep thankfulness. It shapes who we are and how we are, individually and collectively. I know for myself, the tape of thanksgiving runs almost non-stop in my mind. The myriad ways that I see and hear people connecting, supporting, forgiving is so very heartening. When calamities hit, our true selves are, for better or worse, on display. As I reflect on the year past, I recognize the grace, generosity, creativity, sense of humor, solidarity, and compassion that exemplify what we hope to be about as a community of faith, and I give thanks. I give thanks for you.