

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We gather today in anticipation of Christ's birth. After all this is the second Sunday in Advent. But we also gather today for a time of reflection and healing. We all are broken. We are all sinners. We may have relationships that are strained. We may be hurt physically or have been diagnosed with a disease that we didn't want. We may be struggling financially with rising costs of heating fuel and electricity. There are many circumstances in our lives that can cause us a great deal of stress. During this advent season, we have hope.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul also had great hope. He had great hope for Christian unity. He reminded the Romans that they had the scriptures to give them encouragement and hope for harmony with one another.

As I thought about the unity that Paul had hope for, I couldn't help but think of Bonhoeffer and many other theologians who had a great deal of hope in the Christian community caring for one another.

Bonhoeffer stressed that Christian community was given by God's grace. In *Life Together* he writes, "It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."

By God's grace we have each other. Earlier this week I was amazed at the new Kleenex commercial. In this commercial a man asked random people if they'd like to sit down on a couch and let it out. And of course, people began talking and crying and needed a Kleenex, but when they left the couch they seemed to feel better because they had someone to listen to what was happening in their lives.

We can care for one another: Not just the people sitting next to us or near us, but others who are broken. This time of year we have countless opportunities to reach out to those who need to see God's love. Tree of Angels, Toys for Tots, donations to the Salvation Army are just a few. But there is more that we can do.

The scriptures are our guide. They are there for us to read and in reading them the Holy Spirit works in us and stirs our hearts. As disciples, we are reminded of God's grace and our mission: to show God's love.

No matter what is happening in our lives God is there. God may be there through the love and care of a spouse or friend. God may be there as a complete stranger who holds

the door open for someone. God is there in the pain and loneliness that we might be feeling.

As disciples, we have a message: Emmanuel which means God with us. I fear in today's society that this message gets drowned out by trying to find the perfect gift. God is with us.

We have hope as we anticipate Christ's birth. We also have each other by the grace of God. In times of joy we can rejoice together, in times of trial we can lift each other up and remind one another of God's unconditional love. We can pray together, read scripture together, listen to each other...we can be the light of Christ to those who need to see it.

We have hope in God's mercy, grace, peace, and forgiveness. It's a great message that we can all share with our families, our friends, the angry person at the store, the homeless person who needs food, and many others.

God is with us. By his grace we have each other to help us through life's ups and downs. It's a message to be shared through our words and actions.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.