

Christmas Comfort (a sermon)

Children who attend a religious service at least once a week score higher on psychological well-being measurements and have lower risks of mental illness, writes psychoanalyst Erica Komisar in a recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial titled: “Don’t believe in God? Lie to your children.”

Writing “purely from a mental health perspective,” Komisar commends the comfort of “belief in God—in a protective and guiding figure to rely on when times are tough.”

A later letter to the editor by a psychiatrist chides Komisar for promoting lying to one’s children. He has a point. He notes there are many profound ethical traditions that help raise well-adjusted children and comfort them in the face of death. He offers a partial list of such traditions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Stoicism, and secular humanism.

What do we preach and tell our children? We Christians also know that mental health problems are as pervasive among us as among others.

John 14:27: “**Peace** I leave with you; my peace I give you; **not as the world gives** do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Philippians 4:7: “And the **peace** of God, **which passes all understanding**, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

The peace Christ gives is “not as the world gives.” It is not about feelings or emotions. Not about having religious experiences. Or mystical signs and miracles. It is not even about having a feeling of peace or being well-adjusted. All these forms of peace are found the world around. Among us and in other religions. This is peace as the world gives. It is not nothing. We are concerned about good mental health and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, this is not the peace Christ gives.

Paul writes: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is **futile** and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ **have perished**. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men **most to be pitied**” (1 Cor 15:17-19). Paul is brutally honest. We are all a heartbeat away from death and on the way to nothingness. He goes on: But, but, but –

“**But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead**, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead...Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he **delivers** the kingdom to God the Father after **destroying** every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has **put all his enemies under his feet**. The **last enemy** to be **destroyed** is death” (1 Cor 15:20-26).

This is the peace Christ gives: His peace is holy, that means it is beyond us. It is not a feeling. You don’t have to feel a certain something. Experience a certain something. Or do a certain something. His peace is outside of us, in spite of us. As in infant baptism. The infant is not aware of what is happening. The infant has no “appropriate” feelings or emotions. Yet the child is saved, given the peace that passes understanding.

So, too, for us. Our salvation does not depend on our feelings, our doings, our mental health, or lack of mental health. It is beyond our understanding and not dependent on anything we are, think, say, or do.

The Lord of heaven and earth has come in the manger, the cross, the font to save us. Therefore we sing:

Comfort, comfort, ye my people, Speak ye peace, thus saith our God.
Comfort those who sit in darkness Bowed beneath their sorrow's load.
Of the peace that waits for them Speak ye to Jerusalem;
Tell her that her sins I cover, And her warfare now is over.

His comfort.