

## **LOVE AND CONNECTION**

**Week #2 of a 3-Week Christmas Series**

**Dec. 13, 2020**

**Rev. Richard Maraj**

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Hello! And welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's Sunday virtual worship celebration! I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, and we are so thrilled that you can join us!

The holiday season is moving along quickly, and we have got some wonderful services LIVE for you to be able to attend. On December the 23rd and December the 24th, we'll be having one service each of those two nights at 7 p.m. It'll be out in the Petersen Grove, and it'll be a wonderful, beautiful, sacred experience: our Christmas Candlelighting Service. Two of them – LIVE on the 23rd and 24th of December.

Also, on Thursday, December the 31st – New Year's Eve – we'll be having one service at 7 p.m. for our Burning Bowl. Our annual Burning Bowl Service: a good way to let go of the past and welcome the new year.

Right now, we are going to enter a time of prayer and meditation. And to lead us is Rev. Lori.

### **MEDITATION**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** I invite you to join me in a time of prayer and meditation, of silent communion with the Divine, as we close our outer eyes and take in a deep, cleansing breath. As we release it slowly, and take in another mindful breath, gently relaxing our body. Gently relaxing our mind. Letting go of any busy-ness we've experienced so far today. Just gently letting it go as we move our awareness within – into our heart space: to that place of deep and abiding love for ourselves and for each other.

In this Christmas season, we recognize that it is a season of hope. Knowing that God is always bringing good into our lives: in new relationships; in new jobs; in better things to come. Christmas is a season of faith. That we have the faith that – even though what we desire we cannot see right now – it's coming soon. Even the smallest amount of faith brings more good into our lives. This Christmas season is about love. That Jesus taught us to love God and love each other. And that we have that Christ Spirit within us, ready to be developed. Ready to shine out from us. Just as the Christmas lights shine, our lights shine, because we are the light of the world! And when we let our light shine, other people can allow their light to shine! And each and every one of us becomes illuminated, filled with God's light and love and faith and hope. For that is what the Christmas season is!

Jesus was born in a humble manger, because he was a simple man with a great idea: the idea to love. And Jesus was the Prince of Peace, bringing peace to everyone on the planet. And when we spend time in prayer and meditation – when we open our hearts to God's love for us; when we open our minds to divine ideas – we become the givers of peace. Because the more peaceful we are within, the more peaceful the world becomes.

And so, in this Christmas season, we look for the reason for the season. Because you are the gift! You are the gift of your own unique individuality. You are special and the only one like you, here to give the world your love. To make the world a better place.

And so we take a few moments as we move more deeply into the silence, recognizing the peace that passes understanding.

**SILENCE**

And so, sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for this Christmas season. The season for giving; the season for receiving. The season for telling people how much we care about them. For recognizing the Christ Spirit within: rebirthing that within our own souls. And for this – and all our blessings – we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

## MESSAGE

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Thank you, Rev. Lori, for that wonderful meditation; we appreciate it greatly.

So this guy goes to prison. On his first night, he's lying in bed contemplating his situation when he hears someone shout, "44!" And all the inmates laugh. A couple of minutes later, someone else shouts, "72!" And there's more uproarious laughter. Curious, he asked his cellmate, "Hey; what's that about?" And the cellmate says, "Well, there's only one joke book in the entire prison. And they're all numbered, and we've memorized them and heard them all before. Now we just have to shout out the number; it makes it a lot easier." And the new guy says, "Oh; that's really cool!" And so he gets the joke book, reads it through, memorizes them all. And then that night someone yells out, "23!" And everybody laughs. And so then he says to his cellmate, "Hey; do you think I could try?" And the guy says, "Sure! Give it a try!" And so the new guy yells out, "58!" Dead silence; nobody laughs at all! Confused, he says to his cellmate, "What happened?" He said, "Well; some guys can tell a joke, and some guys can't." [Laughs]

I hope I'm one that can! But I'll keep trying either way! You know I will!!!

So this is Week #2 in our Christmas series. Last week we looked at Christmas Hope and Possibility: that Christmas is about hope and possibilities. We looked at Hallmark movies, because I think they always give us a sense of hope seeing dreams come true: seeing people find love and having a special and wonderful time at the holiday season.

So today we're going to move and shift the focus to Love and Connection. Because Christmas really is a time of love and connection. So I watched a non-Hallmark movie this week, and that was the movie *Elf*, starring Will Ferrell. And if you don't know it, let me just synopsize it a bit. It's really about a baby – a human baby – that was raised at the North Pole, and raised as an elf. And his name was Buddy, because that's what the label on his diaper said; they didn't know. And as he grew, he clearly was taller than everyone. Stuck out like a sore thumb. All the furniture had to be made oversized for him, and it was so obvious that he was not an elf. Everybody knew it except him; he believed he was an elf! Even though he couldn't keep up making toys like all the elves; even though he was so much bigger than them. He really believed he was 100% elf.

One day he overheard two elves actually making fun of him – actually the fact that he didn't know he was human. That he was different. He was really devastated, and went to his elf dad, who explained that he was found in Santa's sack and they raised him here. And that his real mom had actually passed away, and he was given up for adoption, because the father actually didn't even know that he was born.

So they decided that he was going to go to New York to visit and to meet his dad. And he got really excited about it. And he showed up at the dad's office and introduced himself. And, of course, the dad was a workaholic, hard-driven, not-nice business man – was irritated to hear of anything about a son. When it was finally proved it was his son, he still was not thrilled. And he was not very nice to Buddy. Buddy was a little young, naïve, a little annoying. You know, he did a whole bunch of things, like he loved eating spaghetti with maple syrup. He did things that just annoyed his father.

And while it annoyed his father, Buddy loved his dad! He was so excited to have a dad! He wanted to be a part of his life; he wanted to hang with him! He just wanted a relationship with his dad. You saw the joy in him!

He would often go to the dad's office. And while he was annoying, one day it went – really the bottom fell out – and he actually ruined a business deal for his dad. His dad got so angry he said, *"I just want you to get out! I don't care that you're my son; I don't care where you go! Just get out and be gone!"* And Buddy was devastated. He wrote his dad an apology letter, and the words in the apology letter said, *"I guess I just don't belong here. I've ruined things. I don't belong anywhere."* And you could just feel his heart sink. You could feel him feel so rejected, so alone. And feeling like he didn't belong with the humans; he didn't belong with his dad, his family. And he didn't belong as an elf. And he just felt so abandoned and so disconnected. Like he just didn't belong and fit anywhere.

So I ask you: Have you ever had a time – at any time in your life – where you felt like you didn't belong? Where you felt like you didn't fit in? Where you felt out of place, or a bit of an outcast? Ever had a time where you felt disconnected and distant from your family or your friends? Or your co-workers? You know, even if it's brief – even if it's infrequent, even if it's only in one area of our lives – feeling like you don't belong is one of the most painful of all human experiences.

You know, there are two things in life that human beings – all human beings – need to have a meaningful and fulfilling life. And the first one is a sense of belonging. Every human being has the need – like for water and for food – to feel like we belong. That we matter. That we make a difference. That we're important and we're valued. Every human being has a need to belong to something greater than themselves. To belong to a family. To belong to a group. To belong to a community.

You know, belonging is a vital need that we all have that's innately in us. In fact, it drives all of our motivations! For achievement, an underlying thing is that we want to belong. We all want that sense of value and importance. To seek approval. To develop relationships and connections – not just superficial ones, but lasting ones. Because there is a need for us to belong and to fit in and to be a part of something.

The sense of belonging actually affects our ability to feel peace and happiness and success. To be able to cope with difficult situations. When we know that we belong – that we are cared for and a part of a larger group – it actually gives us the ability to do far more than on our own. So vital is it that it is said that people who feel like they don't belong – feel lonely and isolated – there's a 45% likely chance of dying early. More than obesity and even more than excessive alcoholism.

You know, it's an important thing for us to belong. And if you go a little deeper in that sense of belonging, it is really an aspect of love. Love is the thing that we all yearn for. Love is the thing that we all desire. Love is something that makes life fulfilling and rich and meaningful. It is the greatest thing; it is the greatest commandment! And the thing is that love is our nature! God is love, and we're created by God! Love is the purpose. Love is the reason. Love is our greatest calling: to share and express the love within ourselves. By caring. By encouraging. By supporting. By helping those in need. By holding a wish for all people: sending our love out to all people is a valuable and powerful thing.

Christmas is a season of love. It is a celebration of the fullness of God's love for all of us. It is the celebration of a mother's love for a child: of Mary's love for Jesus. And I believe that there's a paternal love that gets passed over a lot. When you think of Joseph, you know, marrying someone who was pregnant – not by him! And that he did not want to disgrace or embarrass Mary in any way; he had originally planned to divorce her quietly so she didn't get humiliated or anything negative on her. And then an angel came and spoke to his heart that showed him that he was called to love in a bigger way. That there was so much to the birth of the Christ child – that his support and love of Mary was a vital part of everything working.

Can you imagine loving at a bigger level than you think? To me, that's what Christmas is about. Understanding all the various levels and dimensions and dynamics of love, and inviting ourselves to

open our hearts at that level. I think we would all agree that the greatest power, the greatest healing energy, the greatest transformation in life comes from love. Love is the greatest power and force.

And so, as powerful as love is – as much as we yearn for it and desire it and need it – it is amazing that people are lonelier today than they've ever been. Over the last 15 years – 50 years, in fact! – that the amount of loneliness has actually more than doubled.

Brené Brown, in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, says, “I don't think there's anything lonelier than being with people and feeling alone.” To be surrounded by people and still feel alone is not only one of the worst feelings, it is one of the saddest and one of the most unfortunate and frighteningly more common year after year.

There was a study done by Cigna this year, and they have an index and a survey that says three out of five Americans consider themselves lonely. You know, the modern world – the way it is, and sometimes all these technological advances – don't really facilitate feeling as connected. And then you add in COVID this year, and having to socially distance, sometimes it can be challenging to feel the love and the connection ... not just at Christmas, but particularly in the context of how things are going right now.

I really believe that the way to experience the love and the connection of Christmas is to really understand that Christmas is a call to every single one of us to love deeper than we have loved before. That, to look at our lives and say what our current level of loving is: and our experience of love, and expressing love, and enjoying love, and having love or not having love ... Wherever we are in our lives, the Christ Spirit in us is beckoning us to open our hearts to love at a deeper level. Christmas is an invitation to open our hearts to love more fully and to love more deeply. And I would say – the phrase I would say – the way to experience the love and connection of Christmas is to learn how to more consciously open our hearts in all situations.

You know, that sounds kind of funny: “open your heart.” It sounds kind of silly; like how do you do that? Now, we're good at closing our hearts! I know we've had people tick us off, and we can close off our hearts! Ever been annoyed at someone, and they're in the room, and you won't even give 'em eye contact?!? Like, we're good at closing off our hearts ... thinking it's protecting us. Thinking we're punishing the other person. We all have all kinds of ways to shut down.

But the truth is: There is power and magic and healing in just learning to open our hearts. In the book of Proverbs, Chapter 4, Verse 23, it says, “*Above all else, guard your heart; for everything you do flows from it.*” Everything we do flows from our hearts!

I remember when I was a kid, and I would reluctantly whine when my other asked me to do whatever she wanted me to do, whether do the dishes, take out the garbage, apologize to my sister. I'd whine and do it very reluctantly. And she always – when she saw me giving that kind of attitude and reluctance – she would always say, “*Richard, you don't have to do. Because if you can't do it with a good heart, you shouldn't do it.*” And it always like, *whoosh!* Hit me right there with truth! And the thing is, even as a kid, hearing that, I knew that doing something with a reluctant heart was not a good thing: not only for the other person or the activity or the energy that we put up, but it wasn't a good thing for me! And that is the truth!

Scientific studies are showing that we have the power to consciously open our hearts. Somebody said the longest, hardest, 18-inch journey is the journey from your head to your heart. We're often in our heads a lot, and it takes conscious effort to get to our hearts. In HeartMath, they do studies, and they call it “Heart Coherence.” It's consciously choosing to open our hearts, because our hearts have actually intelligence! Not just the mind and the brain, but our hearts have intelligence! Because everything we do flows from what is in our hearts.

In yoga, they have meditations of opening your heart chakra: that, when you open your heart chakra, we open ourselves to all dimensions of various types of love, from compassion to kindness to forgiveness.

You know, they say that the heart is like an umbrella: it tends to work better when it's open! We may not think we can, but the truth is: Just take a deep breath now. *[Breathes in deeply]* And just open your heart. Take a deep breath and go to your heart space *[breathes in deeply]* and just open a space there. And I would guarantee you: your heart opens. You know, we have more power to consciously open our hearts – and open ourselves to the love that is in us – than we realize. We just need to consciously do it.

Here are some of the ways that we need to open our heart.

**The first one is to OPEN OUR HEARTS TO GOD.** Because God is love! God is the very Source out of which we have come! And it says in Proverbs, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart.”* And why would we trust in God with all of our hearts? First of all, when you trust, you relax and you just naturally open. And why would we trust God? Because God is love! It is in God's image that we are made! That we are created! That we are sustained! Every beat of heart – every possibility, every blessing – comes from our connection to God. So opening our heart to God – the very Source out of which all good comes – is probably the most profound thing to do to open ourselves to a greater level of love.

A simple meditation of just saying, *“God loves me. God loves me. God loves me.”* Take a deep breath *[breathes in deeply]* and slowly three more times: *“God loves me. God loves me. God loves me.”* Take a deep breath *[breathes in deeply]* and just open your heart to God's love. Let God's love just wash over you: cleansing, healing, nurturing, loving and supporting you. One more deep breath *[breathes in deeply]*: *“God loves me.”* Because that's the truth! And meditating on love – meditating on God's love for us – and opening our hearts is the most powerful thing we can do. It absolutely makes a difference.

I was reading this article a few weeks ago, and it said the most profound thing about meditation – that it does for us – is gives us a sense of belonging! And I never really thought of meditation and belonging! But when we open our hearts to God, we realize that: I'm here on purpose! God brought me here! That God wants me here to do great and wonderful things that includes opening my heart and loving in the fullest and greatest way. So first thing is to open our hearts to God.

**The second one is to OPEN OUR HEARTS IN THE AREAS THAT WE'VE CLOSED IT OFF.** And by asking ourselves questions like: Where in your life have you closed your heart to God? Where in your life have you closed your heart to others? Where in your life are you withholding love? And where in your life have you shut down your feelings? Where in your life are you holding a grudge or not willing to let go of the past? Where in your life are you not willing to forgive? We need to look at the areas that we've closed off. Sometimes, again, we think we're trying to protect ourselves, but we actually hurt ourselves more. We stop the flow of love and happiness.

A child was asked to give advice on learning how to love better. And the child said, *“If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend you don't like to play with.”* And the fact is: I bet you we all have a friend we “don't like to play with.” Someone we've bumped heads with. Someone we don't see eye-to-eye with. Someone we think, *“I just don't get that person! How could they be that way? I don't understand them!”*

So who in your life do you “not play well with”? Who in your life have you maybe closed your heart off to? And it's not necessarily going and having lunch with them, but it might vary on different situations. The question is: Are you willing to open a space towards that person when you've closed it off?

Maybe it's opening to compassion for them. Maybe it's opening to understanding. Maybe it's opening to acceptance. You know, maybe it's opening to forgiveness. But where in your life have you closed off your heart, and who are you willing to open your heart towards?

You know, a closed heart is a barrier to belonging: the very thing that we are all seeking and desiring. You know, when we're closed off, it's hard to make deeper connections. It's hard to feel more love and more fulfillment. And by opening our hearts in places that it's closed – particularly with people we don't get along with ... If we're able to do that, well, it'll actually take all of our relationships to a deeper and more profound level of love. Because when we open up to love – even with one person – and open up our hearts, it actually opens up more love in all ways.

So the first one is open our hearts to God. Open our hearts where we've closed it.

**And the third way is OPEN OUR HEARTS TO LOVE THE ONES WE ALREADY LOVE AT AN EVEN DEEPER LEVEL.** You know, sometimes we can kind of keep things at a status quo that we love. You know: they're there; it's the routine. They know they love us! I don't have to show it! Say it. But the truth is: Even at the level that we're loving, and the people you love the most, I guarantee you God's got a deeper level of love in us. There is more intimacy. There is more connection. There's more closeness. More honesty for us. But you have to be willing to go a little deeper, even with the ones that we already show our love to.

And, most of the time, it's just picking: How can I love in a new and different way? Maybe it's a more joyful way. A more playful way. A more creative way. But the deepest level, really, is to be more vulnerable. To be more honest. To share an aspect of ourselves maybe that we're a little scared to share. But we always think we're going to maybe get rejected. But the truth is: Even if there's a discomfort in the beginning, I guarantee you: the consistency of being honest always leads to greater things. You know, everybody's scared to get hurt. But if we're willing to cross that threshold – even if it's clumsy, even if it's awkward – that it still will do greater good of trying to love deeper.

So who in your life right now – that you already love; you already show them love – is life calling you, and Christmas is calling you, to love at a deeper level? And show a new dimension of love, and create it in that relationship? Because I guarantee you: The result will be good, and only good!

**And the last one is to OPEN YOUR HEART TO YOURSELF.** Remember I said there are two vital things for a meaningful and fulfilling life? The first one is that sense of belong that we all have. Well, the second one is to be true to ourselves. It sounds kind of simple, but so often in life, sometimes we are trying to get liked and we want to please. We want approval. We want to say things that people will like us for. And the fact is: While that seems like a good idea, the fact is it's kind of pretend, so it isn't real love. You're having someone like an "image" we think, and not really ourselves. It's almost like we think, "*I'm not quite good enough, so let me say these lovely things for them to like me.*" And that's really not authentic.

You know, to not be who we are – and to not appreciate who we are; to not express the fullness of who we are and being honest with ourselves – is one of the most detrimental things we can do. And, yet, one of the most loving and positive things you can do is just be true to who we are! Be honest about who we are and what we're here to do! Because the greatest gift we have to share with the world is being our most authentic self. Because God put all that in us! And that's the thing we came here to share!

Sometimes we think we don't make a difference. And, you know, just like George Bailey. Remember George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*? Things messed up with his banking business, and he said, "*I wish I was never born.*" Because he felt like he'd messed up so bad. And he got to see what life would be like if he was never born – what a difference he actually made. That he really made a big difference in his community. He made a difference in his family. Sometimes we think we don't make as big a difference, but we make a bigger difference. And the way we make that difference is being true to ourselves. Being who we truly came here to be.

I love that Scripture when it says, "*Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not envious ...*" Sometimes we need to turn that on ourselves! To love ourselves patiently. To love ourselves with kindness and

gentleness. We are God's beloved child, and we need to remember that we are unique and special, and to allow that uniqueness to come forth by just being true to ourselves. Opening our hearts to ourselves.

In the book *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry says these beautiful words: *"The most beautiful things in life cannot be seen or touched, but can only be felt with the heart. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is actually invisible to the eye."* I think that is such a powerful and beautiful thing!

Christmas is calling us to open our hearts at a deeper level. To open our hearts to God; to open our hearts where it's closed; to open our hearts to our loved ones; and open our hearts to ourselves. And so, this Christmas, let us take the invitation of Christmas to love in a deeper way by opening our hearts, and truly experiencing and embodying the love and connection of Christmas.

God bless you all!

### **OFFERING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** This is the time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful to those of you who've sent in checks, who contribute online; you've kept our work going throughout these last nine months! We thank you for that!

I invite you to hold your offering in your hand and affirm our offering blessing with me: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts, these tithes and these offerings. We know they are given in love, they are received in love, and that they move through this ministry with the energy of divine love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed – heaped up, pressed down and overflowing – for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

### **CLOSING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** Well, we're so grateful that you were able to join us online. We hope you've been uplifted by our meditation and our message.

And now will you affirm the Prayer for Protection with me?  
The light of God surrounds us;  
The love of God enfolds us;  
The power of God protects us;  
And the presence of God watches over us.  
Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

Have a fabulous week!

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