

Advent 1 A December 1, 2019
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Season of Friction
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

A professor at New York University's Stern School of Business claims to have figured out how to become the next billionaire. All you have to do is to figure out a way for people to get whatever they want or need or think they need without any of what he calls "friction". To him, friction is any and all of the steps required to obtain an item, whether it is something you want or need. Points of friction, as he calls them, are those small or large tasks human beings seem to resent having to do to get what they want. He isn't just talking about going shopping; he's talking about all the many steps involved in shopping: from getting dressed, to leaving the house, to getting into the car or walking to the bus stop, driving to your destination or figuring out bus routes, dealing with the other people on the bus or the other drivers on the road, finding a parking place, walking to the door, opening the door, walking around the store, dealing with the people in the store: the other customers, their children, and the salespeople who stand between you and the completion of your purchase. Friction is the act of putting all the stuff picked up in the store on the counter, making small talk with the cashier, swiping your card, or counting out cash, entering pin numbers on a little electronic pad, or receiving change, making sure all your items are in bags, hauling the bags of stuff to your car, waiting for the bus, driving home, hauling the bags of stuff into your house or apartment, unpacking them and putting them away. Each and every step I mentioned is a point of friction. The professor believes the reason why on-line shopping is taking off in popularity is because of all the points of friction on-line shopping eliminates. You can stay home in your comfortable clothing, shop in privacy without any work getting to and from a destination, no lugging heavy stuff around a store, no dealing with traffic, parking, public transportation hassles, or people. No cash to count, no cards to swipe, just a few points and clicks and – depending on your retailer – boxes appear on your door step in a day or two and you even avoided one of the hardest points of friction: waiting for long indiscriminate amounts of time. It is all so convenient, and seems to be how the majority of people prefer to shop, that is why the professor believes if a person can come up with a system that eliminates as many points of friction as possible, that person will become the next billionaire.

Maybe he's right. I don't know. But I do believe his theory has neglected to mention that all the work – those points of friction – are not really eliminated. They have been transferred to someone else such as delivery drivers, employees or robots who fetch items off shelves and package them.

There's another problem with this theory. It doesn't take into account the positive role friction can play in forming us into decent human beings who respect the dignity of others. The best example of this that I heard was from a popular actress when she appeared on a talk show a while back. She talked about how after she started getting more famous, her father sat her down and told her no one wanted to be around her because she had gotten so obnoxious. She was mature enough to hear what her father was saying, and upon reflection, realized that when she had started to reach celebrity status, people started to take away those points of friction I mentioned before. When she called a business, she didn't have to wait while representatives were dealing with other callers. When she was at amusement parks with her children there was no need to wait in line to get on rides, she could get on any ride whenever she wanted. When she wanted something, someone else ran the errand and got it for her. When making an appearance, someone else decided what she would wear. She realized these conveniences made some parts of her life easier, but they had also made her less respectful and less aware of others. It was an important moment for this actress, one where she woke up, acknowledged her reality, then did some hard work to change, which she said for her meant learning to embrace those points of friction, because it was those tasks she believed help her be more connected with people and helped strengthen her relationships.

The actress might not have used the words of Advent, but she what she described was most certainly an Advent type of awakening.

Like many traditions of the Church, Advent has become something different from what it was originally intended. For many people, Advent is just a countdown of the days until Christmas. Around this time of year, you might see Advent calendars for sale in stores and on-line. The traditional ones have little windows you can open with candy inside. I've seen other Advent calendars that had bottles of wine instead of pieces of candy behind little doors. There is even a backwards Advent Calendar that challenges you to put items like socks or dried food into a box for the homeless or financially insecure. I don't want to make anyone feel bad about having a tradition of counting down the days until Christmas; I have an Advent Calendar I've used for probably 30 years – it has no candy in it is windows, but instead has art work from one of my all-time favorite books: C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Counting down the days until Christmas isn't a bad or unhealthy practice, it's just not original reason for the first season in the Church's year.

The Church Year doesn't start with fireworks or countdowns, resolutions, feasts or other celebrations of newness. Instead, the Church Year starts quietly lighting one candle out of four as a way to acknowledge the darkness and evil and sin and injustice in the world and to stand in hope that one day, God's kingdom will come completely into this world and all those evils and injustices will be put to right. But it won't be our

justice, it will be God's. We have that hope because we believe this has already begun in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. As we say when we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. In other words, the Church begins its new year by pointing to the end of the world as we know it and God's new heaven and new earth will begin when Jesus returns, and it is this end that we followers of Jesus wait for with deep longing and hope.

So, Advent isn't a count down as much as it is a time to look around, to see the suffering, the hurts, the disappointments, the stuff we don't like to see and avoid the temptation to despair and instead to turn to God, renew our prayers for God's Kingdom to come, and learn again how to wait for Christ to return. And that's hard to do. There's lots of points of friction in such work. We might say Advent is a season of friction, and perhaps the largest point of friction is waiting.

Waiting is not just delaying gratification. Waiting is, as one commentator wrote, "an invitation by God to enter into one of the profound stages of love." Waiting involves trusting God with the future and with our lives. Waiting means being at peace with not knowing precisely how things will turn out.

This is what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel when he talked about no one knowing when the end will come except for God. Not even he knew. So it is pointless, even if it is tempting, to try and calculate when the end will come, and to scour the scriptures to make them say what we want the end to look like. Instead, Jesus suggests we spend our time waiting for the end by being ready.

But how can we be ready when we can't countdown to the end because we don't know when it will happen? Not knowing puts us in what spiritual writer Henri Nouwen called, "An awful desert between where we are and where we want to go." That's how he defined waiting. Yet as uncomfortable as the not knowing what will be is, the key to waiting, Nouwen says, is to be present in the moment, whether it is one of joy or disappointment, hope or confusion, happiness or boredom, even if it is uncomfortable, because that moment is significant. Being in the moment is what the actress did when she heard her father tell her no one wanted to hang out with her.

Such awareness can help us embrace the friction of waiting and look at what we can do to work with God to transform those swords into plows and spears into pruning hooks like we heard in our first lesson today. Perhaps we hear those words as lovely imagery but certainly not realistically attainable. But we have to remember scripture is deeper than it is literal, and it is the invitation of the Season of Advent to look at such readings and see them a bit more deeply. Perhaps a step toward transforming swords into plows is to think of the other kinds of swords; perhaps the times when we might use our tongues as a sword to hurt and divide. We can wait for Christ to return by embracing the friction of working to transform our tongues into tools for planting

seeds of hope and healing with the words we say. Likewise, spears might not be metal points on long sticks, spears can be our opinions and how we express those opinions as attempts to judge others negatively for doing whatever is contrary to our opinions. Perhaps this Advent we can embrace the friction of working on transforming how we express our opinion in more healthy ways by tending to our hearts and minds and doing that pruning work of forgiving and being compassionate.

None of this is easy; and probably won't make us billionaires or popular actors, but could be spiritual lights of hope in the darkness for us and others as we learn to more deeply love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and more deeply love our neighbors as ourselves and in so doing become a little more ready and more eager to welcome Christ when he comes again.