

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, December 16, 2007
10:30 a.m.

Lucy Van Pelt: I know how you feel about all this Christmas business, getting depressed and all that. It happens to me every year. I never get what I really want. I always get a lot of stupid toys or a bicycle or clothes or something like that.

Charlie Brown: What is it you want?

Lucy Van Pelt: Real estate.

Charles Schulz, *A Charlie Brown Christmas, 1965*

“The Work of Advent - Weeping”

Charlie Brown: [*Charlie Brown and Linus stop at a wall on their trip to the pond for ice skating*] I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel.

[*begins to walk with Linus again*]

Charlie Brown: I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.

Linus Van Pelt: Charlie Brown, you're the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem. Maybe Lucy's right. Of all the Charlie Browns in the world, you're the Charlie Browniest.

Leave it to good old Charlie Brown to express what so many of us really feel! What are some of the reasons why Charlie Brown (and we) might have a case of the Holiday Blues?

Holiday Blues or Holiday Depression:

The holiday blues or depression may occur during any holiday or vacation time, but it most commonly happens during December at a time when everyone in the world seems to be happy. People experiencing the blues often feel sad, lonely, depressed or anxious in and around the holiday season.

Perhaps Charlie Brown just lost a grandparent, or had a friend move away, or maybe his father lost his job or maybe he was snubbed once again by the little red-headed girl, the object of his unfulfilled desires. He faces the holidays at a time of loss and feels let down.

For many the holiday season is a difficult time, one of sadness, loneliness, self-evaluation--we regret the past and feel anxious about the future. During this time of year there can be great stress--psychological, physical and financial. As a result, the holidays leave many people feeling blue, not cheery.

Let's look at the Holiday Blues a little more closely:

1) Grief:

Charlie Brown may be grieving the loss of a loved one--a recent loss or one in the past. The holiday season can be especially difficult for those who have lost a loved one and are facing the first or the umpteenth season without them.

Consider those facing the holidays without a loved one; for them, coping with the holidays can be a very challenging time. Memories of holidays past and loved ones no longer present or thoughts of the celebration that will never be which can be very difficult for those grieving a loss.

2) Depression:

Charlie Brown may have been truly depressed for months before the holidays and the holidays only make the depression worse. Depression can range from normal feelings of the blues through dysthymia (chronic low feelings) to a major depression. It is characterized by feelings of sadness, despair, helplessness and discouragement that last for prolonged periods of time (more than 2 weeks) without letting up.

Specific symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Sleeping too much or too little, middle-of-the night or early morning waking
- Reduced appetite and weight loss or increased appetite and weight gain
- Loss of interest in normally pleasurable activities, including sex
- Irritability or restlessness
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feeling inappropriate guilt, hopelessness or worthlessness

3) Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD):

Maybe Charlie Brown has the "Winter Blues" or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Seasonal Affective Disorder is feeling sad or depressed during the fall and winter due to decreasing amounts of daylight. If you feel this might be the cause of your distress, please make an appointment to see your doctor. There are a variety of treatments that can be very effective, including regular exercise and plenty of sunshine.

4) Stress:

Charlie Brown could also be stressed trying to create the perfect Christmas. Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response. The Holidays can be a very stressful time-mentally, physically and especially financially.

Basics of Coping with the Holidays:

Here are some basic ways that Charlie Brown (or any of us) can use to cope with the holidays.

- Take things one hour at a time, one day at a time.
- Maintain a normal routine. Do normal daily activities.
- Rest and get enough sleep.
- Regular exercise helps relieve stress and improve moods.
- Eat a balanced, healthy diet. Limit high calorie foods and junk food.
- Avoid using alcohol or other drugs to mask the pain.

- Do activities and be with the people that comfort, nourish and recharge you.
- Remember how you have coped in the past. Draw on these strengths again.

Other things that Charlie Brown (and we) might do to help manage the blues include:

- Deciding on our priorities. Establish realistic goals.
- Let others help with the preparations.
- Take time for ourselves.
- Set a budget and stick to it.
- Enjoy free holiday activities.
- Give free gifts from the heart-time and love.
- Be around supportive people.
- Volunteer and help others.
- Create a New Holiday Tradition.
- Find a new place or way to celebrate.

Finally, remember to R-E-S-T:

- Set **Reasonable expectations and goals**. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Get plenty of rest and relaxation.
- **Exercise daily**. Eat and drink in moderation. Enjoy free activities.
- **Simplify to relieve stress**. Set a budget for social activities and gifts. Simple gifts can still bring happiness.
- Make **Time to relax and remember**. Spend time with caring, supportive people. Keep in mind that traditions can be changed.

When to be Concerned - Thoughts of Suicide, Depression, Prolonged Grief:

There are cases when what appears to be the "Holiday Blues" is something more. These include feelings of sadness that include suicidal thoughts, prolonged blues that turn into depression or complicated grief. *Anyone with suicidal thoughts needs to contact his or her pastor, a physician, mental health provider, crisis line or hospital emergency department.*

Resolving After the Holidays:

Fortunately, if the diagnosis is "Holiday Blues," which seems to be the case for Charlie Brown, these feelings tend to be short-lived. Holiday Blues can be emotionally intense and very upsetting lasting only a few days to weeks around the holidays. The good news is that the Blues typically subside once the person's normal routines are resumed.

Of course the real reason for us to be hopeful this season is the promise of our faith, the coming of Jesus into the world, his everlasting love, and the steadfast companionship of those who understand in his name.

Charlie Brown: Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?

Linus Van Pelt: Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.

[moves toward the center of the stage]

Linus Van Pelt: Lights, please. *[a spotlight shines on Linus]*

Linus Van Pelt: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of

the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'"

[Linus picks up his blanket and walks back towards Charlie Brown]

Linus Van Pelt: That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

If you find yourself relating to these "blue" feelings this year, please remember to stop by the church Tuesday evening from 3:30 – 6:30 p.m. for a time of quiet reflection and prayer.

For now, let us hear the words of the Psalmist:

Happiness is in letting God help us,
in pinning our hopes on the Creator
who spun the starry skies and planet earth,
shaped great oceans and all creatures;

Who keeps every promise to us,
vindicating the oppressed,
providing food for the hungry,
and setting prisoners free.

Our God gives sight to blind eyes,
and lifts up those who have been flattened.
Our God loves all who are reliable,
and keeps an eye on the refugee.

Our God stands up for widow and orphan,
but brings down haughty oppressors.
Our God will always be there for us;
sing your heart out for all generations. (Bruce Prewer, Psalm 146 adapted)

Amen.

My acknowledgement and thanks to Dr. Kirsti A. Dyer MD, MS, FT and her article, "Handling the Holiday Blues or a Charlie Brown Xmas," for the information contained in this sermon.