Candle Talk

I wish you all could see the congregation from where I stand. It is so beautiful to see each of your faces illuminated by the soft light of the candles. One thing I love about Moravians is that we find ways to make what is practical beautiful. The red paper on your candles is there to keep you safe from dripping wax. But it is also beautiful and reminds us even at Christmas that the person whose birth we celebrate shed his blood for us.

When I was a boy, my grandmother had several Christmas rituals, such as baking cookies and gathering in her parlor, which had faded red walls, to decorate the cedar tree and sing carols. One of her rituals was to take me to Thalheimer's to buy a new suit for Christmas. I think every time it was a blue suit. Of course, when you are six or seven years old, getting a new suit is not what you were looking forward to for Christmas. But Nana wanted to be sure that I was dressed appropriately for the most important ritual – attending the lovefeast and candle service at Calvary Moravian. My family attended Hope Moravian, a small church, and so I grew up with two lovefeasts on Christmas Eve.

I remember being in awe walking into the sanctuary of Calvary, and wondered how my grandmother could always find the same pew, her pew, every year. The choir was amazing and when they did the descant in O Come, All Ye Faithful I thought this must be what the heavenly choir was like. I enjoyed the coffee and buns, but the peak experience was getting to hold a beeswax candle. When I became a parent, I realized how anxious it makes you to let your child hold a candle, but also how lovely it is to see the wonder in their eyes.

I remember one Christmas Eve when I was in first or second grade. It was before I got my first pair of glasses. I was wearing my new suit, sitting next to my grandmother at Calvary. I was proudly holding my candle and loudly singing off key. Nana whispered to me to keep my candle upright lest I drip wax on my new clothes. But with my astigmatism it looked straight to me. Since it wasn't dripping wax, I didn't see a problem. But my grandmother was very

worried. She told me again to keep it straight, and I tried. But she was still not satisfied. Finally, she reached over and jerked my candle upright. Hot wax flew onto my hands and my new suit. I almost cried, but what was worst was that she looked at me and said, "I told you that you were going to get wax on you!" My grandmother that evening did something that I think we Christians are all guilty of doing at some time or another.

Sometimes we Christians worry too much about what other people are doing or not doing or doing poorly, instead of worrying about our own behavior. In our righteous zeal to correct them, we often cause more harm than good. We leave people feeling rejected and dejected. The history of Christianity is filled with people who were convinced they were right and tried to force others to do things the way they thought they should. Instead of bringing peace and beauty into the world, they brought fire and pain. Instead of gaining new brothers and sisters, we create enemies.

The message of Christmas is that God looked down from heaven and saw what a mess we humans had made of our lives and our world. Rather than condemning us, God chose to come into the world as a child. One of my favorite lines from a Christmas carol is the phrase: "Mild he lays his glory by." The child divines, whom we worship and serve, was born in a cowshed to a poor woman. He grew up to be a teacher, a healer, and the prince of peace. Each year we symbolize the coming of Christ into the world by gently passing a lit candle, a small flame, to our neighbors, young and old. And then on the last verse of our last hymn we will lift our candles in unison to illuminate this room. It is a beautiful tradition that teaches us what is most important: that we go into the world sharing the light of Christ, being careful not to burn others in our zeal.

Please stand for our final hymn. Christ the Lord, the Lord most glorious, now is born O shout aloud.