

Entering the Christmas Season

Rev. Mark Hayes

December 14, 2008

Reading: “A Christmas Prayer” by the Rev. Maureen Killoran

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense
would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,
the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

I would (if I could)
have for you the gift of courage,
the strength to face the gauntlets
only you can name,
and the firmness in your heart to know
that you (yes, you!) can be a bearer of the quiet dignity
that is the human glorified.

I would (if by my intention I could make it happen)
have for you the gift of connection,
the sense of standing on the hinge of time,
touching past and future
standing with certainty that you (yes, you!)
are the point where it all comes together.

I would (if wishing could make it so)
have for you the gift of community,
a nucleus of love and challenge,
to convince you in your soul
that you (yes, you!) are a source of light
in a world too long believing in the dark.

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense,
would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,
the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

Homily:

It's very clear that we are entering the Christmas season. We can tell by our singing. We can tell by our gathering to decorate the Christmas tree. We can tell by the hustle and bustle going on all around us as we rush to get that last gift bought, and that last card sent.

But what does it really mean to enter the Christmas season? If we choose to live our lives intentionally and with meaning, then Christmas isn't something that simply happens to us. It is something we choose to embrace. An opportunity to reaffirm and live out some of our most cherished values.

The Rev. William Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, agrees with me about the role of choice in the season. Just two days ago he issued a pastoral letter called "Choosing Love This Holiday Season." He opens the letter with these words:

As the winter days of this holiday season grow shorter, we light candles in the darkness. Outside there may be blustering wind and even snow, but inside our homes and congregations, we create warm sanctuaries. We celebrate the joys of the season and anticipate the return of the light.

"We create warm sanctuaries." We don't discover them. They are not handed to us. We create them. As I sometimes quote: "This space is made holy by our presence," as well as by our holy intentions. And so it is with the Christmas season. It is made holy by the spirit that we bring to it, even as it has been made holy by countless generations of loving, generous people before us.

Part of what makes the hope and love and joy that we celebrate this time of year so important is that life isn't always joyful. Rev. Sinkford's letter points out that

For many here in the United States and around the world, this year's holiday season will be a challenging one, in which the continuing problems of war and poverty will be exacerbated by worldwide economic strains. Now, as much as ever, it is critical that we affirm the primacy of love and hope. . .

[He writes that] In this season of contrasts, I am reminded of the words of the Rev. Rebecca Parker: "Your gifts, whatever you discover them to be, can be used to bless or curse the world." . . .

[And he goes on to say,] I am heartened by the stories of Unitarian Universalist congregations that are practicing generosity this holiday season. I am proud to hear about our congregations that are collecting goods to keep struggling families warm, that are supporting food banks, that are resisting rampant consumerism and promoting ethical consumption, and that are advocating for a more just society.

That, I would suggest, is what it really means for us to enter the Christmas season. The books have gone out this week to children in need here in Centre County from our Book For Every Child Project. We raised nearly a thousand dollars last week for the Park Forest Day Nursery, and will have a chance later this morning to wrap gifts for the children there. We will be hosting a reading of Dickens's *The Christmas Carol* by Tony Lentz next Saturday to raise funds for the Centre County Fuel Bank to help keep our neighbors' homes warm this winter. The offerings from our two Christmas Eve services

will once again go into my Minister's Discretionary Fund, which gives me the resources to provide direct assistance to members and friends of our congregation who find themselves going through a rough patch.

Yes, we have entered the Christmas season, and have embraced the Christmas spirit. The spirit of love, of hope, of giving. And while I want to recognize and acknowledge the importance of our sharing of our material bounty, I also want to reaffirm those less tangible gifts that are just as important. Gifts, like those mentioned in our meditation this morning, of courage, and connection, and community. The Rev. David Blanchard expressed it well in a recent article in the newsletter of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. He writes:

The best story I ever heard about gift-giving has nothing to do with Christmas, and everything to do with Christmas. It's about an African boy who wanted to give a gift to his teacher who was going home to England. The child had no money and his options were few. The day before the teacher was to leave, the child brought her a huge seashell. The teacher asked the boy where he could have found such a shell. He told her there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found, and when he named the place, a certain bay many miles away, the teacher was speechless.

"Why ... why, it's gorgeous ... wonderful, but you shouldn't have gone all that way to get a gift for me." His eyes brightening, the boy answered, "Long walk part of gift."

"Long walk part of gift." Most of the meaningful gifts we give to each other require some version of that "long walk." The long walk we sign on for with children, who need our patience, our wisdom, our honesty, and our trust more than we might first have imagined when their lives began. The long walk we share with our spouses, which takes us through uncharted, unexpected territories of sickness and health, richer and poorer, better and worse. The long walk we take with our friends when they are grieving the loss of someone they love, when they are ill, when they are discouraged. The long walk of feeling a sense of unity with those whom prosperity has left behind. The long walk of reconciliation with all that separates us from a deep sense of life's great purpose and meaning. "Long walk part of gift."

When Christmas has been tidied up and packed away for another year, the gifts acknowledged, many already forgotten, the New Year stretches in front of us. What will get us through those months, with all that they may hold, will not be the things in the boxes. We must look to the hands of those who bought and wrapped and carried those gifts. With their gifts, they are telling us something too wonderful, perhaps too embarrassing for words. They are telling us that, for us, they will take the long walk.

That is the spirit that I hope we will bring with us into this Christmas season, as we choose to embrace love and hope and joy. As we choose to bless the world and one another. As we choose to bring meaning and wonder to this holiday season, and to every season.

Finally, on a somewhat more practical note, I'd like to leave you with some advice from the Rev. Clarke Dewey Wells on "Keeping Sane in December." His "rules" are addressed to those of us who sometimes find ourselves spiraling out of control at this time of year. Among them are these:

- Weigh in every morning, the greatest reality-check invented since flu or jail.
- Be a good listener for all your friends who will fall apart over the next few weeks.
- When you wish people Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, look them in the eye.
- RSVP to December party invitations with a request for a raincheck in February, a month that needs all the help it can get.
- The next time you feel impossibly rushed, late with shopping, worried about money, gifts, sending cards, turn on and tune in Bach's Christmas Oratorio, lie back on the couch and disappoint the drug industry and Freudians everywhere.
- For those of you who get torn apart by holiday depression or anxiety attacks, I commend long walks, looking at Christmas trees and then home for cocoa.
- And last, please don't feel too guilty about violating any of the above rules. Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and a wink at a star in the night's dark sky.