

# FINDING JOY AND PEACE

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham  
Unitarian Universalist  
December 13, 2009  
The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Day of Hannukah  
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Modern Reading

Holiday Beatitudes

David Rhys Williams, adapted

In this blessed season let us worship at the altar of joy, for to miss its joy is to miss its holiest secret.

Let us withdraw from the cold and barren world of prosaic fact if only for a time. That we may take counsel of the wisdom of poetry and legend, and warm ourselves by the fireside of fancy.

Blessed are they who have the strength and persistence of a lamp that keeps burning long after its oil has been exhausted.

Blessed are they that have vision enough to behold a guiding star in the dark mystery that girdles the earth.

Blessed are they who have imagination enough to hear celestial voices and joyous tidings the midnight hours of life.

Blessed are they who have faith enough to work for a world of justice and peace in the midst of present wrongs and strife.

Blessed are they who have greatness enough to become at times as a little child;  
Blessed are they who have zest enough to take delight in simple things;

Blessed are they who have wisdom enough to know that the kingdom of heaven is very close at hand, and that all may enter in who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand.

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This is a season that emphasizes joy and peace. But perhaps for that very reason many people find both hard to find. A certain frantic level of agitated shopping and preparation is common. And so are moments of personal sadness and melancholy. The reasons for this are not just all the commercialization that we clergy routinely denounce as losing the very spirit of the season. Sometimes deeply personal reasons intrude. With my mother ill this weekend, I'm very conscious, for example, of holding off what Dickens once called "the ghost of Christmas past." Nostalgia, fueled by idealized memories with loved ones now frail or departed, is too tempting. My late friend Forrest Church suggested meeting it with a "nostalgia for the present."

Sound counsel! But even Christmas Present, as Dickens knew can be hard to face at times. There's a song by Joni Mitchell called "December" I've listened to several times recently: "It's coming on Christmas/ They're cutting down trees/ They're putting up reindeer/ And singing songs of joy and peace.// Oh I wish I had a river/ I could skate away on."

Listening closely, however, I notice an irony. The singer wants to skate away and yet has pushed away the very one who loved her best, who "tried so hard to help me," and who "put me at ease." So she sings: "I'm so hard to handle/ I'm selfish and sad,/ now I've lost the best love I ever had."

And I don't know about you, but I recognize this very temptation in myself as well. It's the way sadness and depression often can reinforce itself: by pushing away the very sources of love – and therefore of peace, and true joy -- that are trying hardest to get through to us, and to tell us that we are worthy of love, and worthy to be happy.

Guilt comes in many forms. But it comes especially easy, and unconsciously, to those of us – meaning most of us – who have become accustomed to blessings, and to unearned privilege.

Certainly I've known this in my own life; and seen it in yours as well. Almost a reluctance to feel anything akin to deep joy, or true peace, for fear that such feelings might make some moral claim upon us. Because we know, intellectually at least, how many people there are out there who face this season with far less than we have; who suffer injustices we either tolerate or benefit from; who face violence in which the same is true.

No wonder we liberals so often push the fulfillment of justice and peace in human history off into a distant future. And then feel sad about how far off it seems. I think I could hear some of that very sadness in President Obama's speech in Oslo this past week – about which I'll have more to say on Christmas Eve.

But if peace and joy are always in the future, then to miss the joy of Christmas, *this* Christmas, this present holiday season, is to miss its holiest secret. Empathy for suffering in the present world is surely a good thing. But too often people like us can also be haunted by this “ghost of Christmas future.” And then peace and joy delayed are, like justice, joy and peace denied.

I'm enough of a cultural religious historian that I think I know where this tendency came from. Around the same time Dickens was writing, some of our American Unitarian forebears were going beyond Puritan predestination by emphasizing our responsibility to deal with injustice in the world. But in their hymns like Longfellow's “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” saying,

“And in despair I bowed my head:/ ‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said,  
For hate is strong and mocks the song/ of peace on earth goodwill to men.”

Or to the one by his contemporary Unitarian James Russell Lowell, which exhorts us to recall,

“If there breathe on earth a slave/ are we truly free and brave?”

I am reminded of the old saying, “If you scratch a Unitarian, you find a Puritan.” And the old Puritans, you may recall, refused to celebrate Christmas at all! They thought it was all too pagan and Popish, and so just kept earnestly working at improving things all winter long.

To which, I'm sorry, I simply say: Phooey! I know the modern equivalent of Puritans among us, who think that if you don't believe this or that about the Christmas story, or that of Hannukah,

then why celebrate. Literalists, who often seem to me to be rather like unconverted Scrooges, saying “Bah! Humbug!”

Far better, I think, to remember that it was other of the early Unitarians who actually promoted here in New England some of most beloved forms of seasonal holiday celebration; who wrote some of its best loved songs and carols, from “Jingle Bells” to “It Came upon a Midnight Clear”; who also spread practices like placing lit candles in the windows of the home, hanging stockings, and cutting and decorating a Christmas tree.

Back in the medieval church these four weeks before the feast of Christ’s Mass became Advent – a somber, penitential season of preparation, examination of conscience, and waiting – rather like Lest before Easter. But even *that* tradition had the wisdom to change the color of the third Advent candle from penitential purple to a joyous rose color, and to call this *Gaudete Sunday*: from the Latin word for “rejoice, enjoy,” as though they worried we might forget to do that!

On Friday night Gwen and I were at Needham’s Temple Aliyah, the conservative synagogue, which like Temple Beth Shalom, the reform synagogue that took us in when we were renovating, began its community life here in our largely symbol-free Meetinghouse. Rabbi Harold Kushner spoke in celebration of the long leadership there of my good friend, Rabbi Carl Perkin; on a night that was both Shabbat and the first night of Hannukah. In his own remarks, Carl explained that if a Jew is so poor that he or she can afford only one candle on a night when those two occasions coincide, the rabbis long ago ruled that then that one candle should be lit not to recall the festival, the struggle of long ago, but rather for Shabbat, and its weekly reminder to be grateful simply for the gift of the creation, the gift of life. This seemed to me somehow a spiritual parallel.

So on the way home, I started thinking how other spiritual traditions suggest we go about finding joy and peace. And soon thought of that great Buddhist teacher, the Dalai Lama; who doesn’t waste time or spiritual energy in nostalgia for the past, even though he who now lives in exile. Nor does he live in an idealized future. Listen to him, or read him, and you resonate with a man who has found the capacity for inner peace, and deep joy, in each moment in the present.

In his book, *The Art of Happiness*, he teaches his version of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths: First, the reality of life may often be suffering, but its *purpose* is happiness. Second, happiness is determined less by one's external circumstances or by events than by one's inner state of mind, at least after basic survival needs are met. Third, happiness *can* be achieved, if we train our hearts and minds, and reshape our attitudes and outlook. To which I would add, in Western spiritual terms, by setting the necessary but not always sufficient conditions, for us to receive the gifts, the grace, of inner peace, and joy. And finally, to that extent at least, the keys to happiness, to peace and joy, are in our own hands, as a reflection of the habits we cultivate.

Recently Ruth Sutro's son Roger, who grew up in the congregation, sent me a Letterman-like list of "The Top Ten Warning Signs of Good Health: – mental, physical, and spiritual. Here they are! Please check off those you are gifted with or cultivating, and those still needing spiritual work:

- Number 10: The continuing presence of a support network of friends.
- Number 9: Repeated episodes of gratitude and generosity.
- Number 8: A tendency to identify and communicate authentic feelings.
- Number 7: A persistent appetite for living, doing and helping.
- Number 6: Rapid response to, and recovery from, episodes of stress and challenge.
- Number 5: A tendency to adapt well to changing conditions.
- Number 4: A sense of spiritual involvement and connection.
- Number 3: Episodic outbursts of joyful, happy experiences.
- Number 2: Chronic positive expectations: a tendency to frame events in a positive light.
- Number 1: A persistent, resilient sense of humor.

I don't know about you, but I struggle with several of those. A few others come more naturally, as gifts. When I think of my mother, now at 89 struggling for life itself this morning as I speak, I'm able to identify which were her gifts to me, which were my father's, and which were elusive in our family. None of us, I suspect, come to adulthood with all the spiritual graces needed given; otherwise we would have no spiritual work of our own still to do! And then we would be like the Bodhisattvas who renounce nirvana in order to stay here and help others learn more compassion.

Still, all of these are, indeed, spiritual gifts. So when gifts are being handed out at this season, may these be ones you most yearn for and reach out for, not the new thing-a-ma-jig or doo-dad. And may you find, at this still point of the turning year, the time to pause, and to open yourself to what is already near at hand: the peace within that may for now pass your very understanding, but which the bustling world can never either give nor take away entirely; and the deep joy that comes from the wisdom which leads us to turn toward, and not skate away from, the very present sources of love, acceptance, joy, and connection, which surround us.

So may you be surprised by joy this season, and by the happiness that comes from heeding the ancient admonitions to rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. In singing, rejoicing, and praying for enough wisdom to turn over, if only for a season, to a source beyond ourselves, responsibility for creating peace on earth, and goodwill to all. And just the wisdom to pray at all, as we do now:

Spirit of Life and Love; God known by so many names; and Mystery beyond all our naming:

We pray for peace today, not only in the world around us, but first within us, here and now.

Help us realize that if we are to be true messengers and agents of peace it must begin with us.

Then help us also to open ourselves to the present possibility of happiness and of joy –

not only in this season, but through all the days and years that we've been given.

Teach us to rejoice always, and to be glad in them, every one, that others may rejoice in us also.

Amen, and amen.