

Draft

THE GRINCH AND JESUS
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
December 24, 2010

Good evening, everyone, and thank you for being here with us for our annual Christmas Eve candlelight service. I'd particularly like to thank Monica and Inge for their special musical gifts tonight and of course all of you being here.

I know that there's a tradition that a Christmas Eve sermon in a Unitarian Universalist church ought to have a few important components. It needs to be ecumenical and cover all theological bases. It must try to tiptoe around the question of Jesus' divinity and all those miracles. The sermon ought to be inspiring with the best of our liberal religious faith. And just for tonight, it's Ok to sing the Christmas carols with the traditional words.

So why should I entitle this sermon "The Grinch and Jesus" and have a provocative reading from the humorist Garrison Keillor? Isn't the Christmas season all about love and kindness and goodwill to all people? Why single out the cranky words of a humorist who had a mild stroke this summer and whose humor can skewer the worthy and unworthy alike?

Am I being mean if I consider Garrison Keillor a bit of a Grinch?

I probably am but his words can be a reminder that "The Battle for Christmas" continues every year in America. Last year in Washington State we read of disputes about whether the Christmas Tree at the capital building in Olympia should really be a Holiday tree. The folks at SeaTac airport wrestled with the same problem. Protesters on all sides of the dilemma showed up to encourage more division.

So it seems to me that the cultural war about Christmas fits nicely into Garrison Keillor's words. What's a Unitarian Universalist to do?

Is he right that Christmas should be left to Christians just as Ramadan is exclusively an Islamic holiday? Or is Mr. Keillor making light of a much larger message of Christmas?

I belong to a large email list of Unitarian Universalist ministers around the world. I decided to send them a link to Garrison Keillor's column last week and noted the comments about Unitarian use of words in songs. The result was a week long conversation by turns profound and a lot of grumbling about humorists who have too much free time on their hands.

So here we are presented with two versions of Christmas.

One from Mr. Keillor would propose we post-Protestant, post-Christian folk get out of the way and find our own holiday to celebrate.

His version of true Christmas would mean that the core historically authentic celebration of Christ's birth be the correct one.

Therein lies a problem. The history of "Christ's-mass" that began with an edict from Pope Julius in 350 Common Era is convoluted. What became Christmas Day on December 25 evolved like this: The ancient Greeks held a festival similar to that of the Mesopotamian festivals to assist their god Kronos who would battle the god Zeus and his Titans. The Romans celebrated their god Saturn. Their festival was called Saturnalia which began the middle of December and ended January 1st. With cries of "Jo Saturnalia!" the celebration would include masquerades in the streets, big festive meals, visiting friends, and the exchange of good-luck gifts. The Romans decked their halls with garlands of laurel and green trees lit with candles. The masters and slaves would exchange places. It was a fun and festive time for the Romans, but the Christians thought it an abomination. The early Christians wanted to keep the birthday of their Christ child a solemn and religious holiday, not one of cheer and merriment as was the pagan Saturnalia.

As Christianity spread they were alarmed by the continuing celebration of pagan customs and Saturnalia among their converts. At first the Church forbid this kind of celebration. But it was to no avail. Eventually it was decided that the celebration would be tamed and made into a celebration fit for the Christian Son of God.

Christmas evolved over the centuries to take in other pagan solstice and winter celebrations. It was banned in England and in Massachusetts for a time but became popular again in the 18th century.

Hymns, Christmas Carols and other forms of music have evolved as well. Many Christmas carols popular in the medieval period are no longer sung or have been lost. Others, like Silent Night, have been altered to fit the language and traditions of their times.

It's hard to imagine what Christmas Garrison Keillor is defending unless it's one of his childhood. His orthodox version of Christmas seems outdated by at least a few centuries.

The fact is that Christ's-mass ordered by the Bishop of Rome in the late second century is very little like the holiday we celebrate tomorrow.

Is Christmas perfect? It's no more perfect than the bills passed by Congress such as the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and the bill that extended tax cuts and support for the unemployed. It's no more perfect than

all the commercials meant to seduce us to buy, buy, and buy. It's no more perfect than any of us as human beings.

This is the second version of Christmas and the one that Garrison Keillor rails against in the column. It's a Christmas where "Silent Night" and "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" can be heard next to each other on the radio. It's a Christmas of grumbling in traffic and lines at stores. It's a Christmas that doesn't seem very holy or sacred.

This second version of Christmas has spread far and wide from the original mass for Christ. Like a pebble dropped into a still pond, the original birthday of Jesus has caused waves and ripples that spread two millennia later.

This second version of Christmas isn't perfect but it is far larger than any Christian holiday. It reminds us that all the festivals and celebrations and worshipping of gods cannot compare to the wishes and hopes of one human heart.

It reminds us that if we unwrap the outer layers of commercials, silly songs, desperate shopping and more, we will find inside carefully nurtured the love and compassion in each of us that wants to be claimed. Christmas at its best brings us to the universal hope of humanity: that we have inherent goodness, that we care for one another, and that we are filled with the potential for greatness.

Every baby has this hope. Every child born is the gift.

Earlier I mentioned the chat email list of ministers and the conversation about Keillor's column.

Many thoughtful comments turned up but I especially liked one from a Unitarian Universalist Christian minister on the East Coast in a New England UU church. Here are his words that speak to a Christmas for all of us that can be the true promise of Jesus.

He writes, in part, that **"...Christians used to maintain that the birth of the savior was an event that had at least the potential of saving all of humanity. Explicit, overt and self-proclaimed Christianity is retreating into tribalism in the face of the far-more dynamic and diverse secular (and commercial) global culture. Implicit, covert and self-emptied forms and descendants of Christianity (like Unitarian Universalism) are still working on the project of universalizing the meaning of the birth of Jesus. Most of us will preach and enact a meaning of the birth of Jesus this season, that of a winter festival that reminds us that what we hope for will come from the most unexpected places (a poor baby), in sudden and seemingly miraculous reversals (like light in the darkest hour, kings worshipping in stables, virgin**

births), and be incarnated in acts of generosity, kindness, hospitality and rootedness. We are telling the same story, but stripped of all the elements by which Christianity has traditionally claimed earthly power by holding the keys to the Kingdom. We tell of a salvation that spreads from hand to hand like the candlelight in a darkened sanctuary on Christmas Eve.”

That salvation is not based on how bad we’ve been but on how we spread love and caring from hand to hand every day of our lives.

That salvation is Christmas and all the holidays that remind us of our better selves.

That salvation is larger than any religion but is only as large as the human heart.

Our salvation is here and now and as we sing the old great songs in ever new ways.

This Christmas is in the silence and the softness of the candles we’ll light and the silent night that softly tells us we are loved.