



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Good Enough,”  
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2014

Are you ready for Christmas? Have people been asking you that lately? I hear that question as about shopping and decorating and wrapping, about cooking perhaps--preparing for this great feast day we call Christmas.

If you're like me, you have been thinking about this. This time of year, I find myself worrying about gift giving--what should I get for the people I love? And worrying--when am I going to find the time to go out and do the shopping? What about the crowds--the lines at the stores, and at the Post Office? What about traffic and findin a place to park?

No wonder some of us put this off 'til the last minute. You know, there are people out shopping right now! And here we are, gathered together to hear the old story, to sing songs of joy and peace, and soon, to light candles in the darkness. I think of this prayer for evening:

Lord, it is night.  
The night is for stillness.  
Let us be still in the presence of God.  
It is night after a long day.  
What has been done has been done;  
what has not been done has not been done;  
let it be.  
The night is dark.  
Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives  
rest in you.  
The night is quiet.  
Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,  
all dear to us,  
and all who have no peace.  
The night heralds the dawn.  
Let us look expectantly to a new day,  
new joys,  
new possibilities.  
In your name we pray.  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This prayer is from *The New Zealand Prayer Book*.

It seems to me that much of our worry and anxiety about getting ready for Christmas is rooted in the fear that we don't have enough, that we aren't good enough. It's hard enough to find a gift that's the right color and the right size; how are we ever going to find things that adequately express our love and care for those who are dear to us?

The truth is, we're not. Things, as good as they might be, are only things. What our loved ones want for Christmas is not something in a box, but rather, connection, love, time with family and friends, what we call "the Christmas spirit." That's what we all want. Presents are nice too, don't get me wrong, but things are never going to satisfy our hunger for love and connection. Only living beings can do that--people, and God; pets too.

Frederick Buechner says that one Christmas Eve, the presents were finally all wrapped and under the tree. He was exhausted and about to go to bed, when he remembered that his neighbor had asked him to feed his sheep while the neighbor was away. Buechner says, "The snow was falling -- this was in Vermont -- my brother and I went down the hill to feed the sheep. We went into the barn and we got the bales of hay. We took them out into the sheep shed, cut the string, turned on the forty-watt bulb and began scattering the hay.

"The sheep came bumbling up, getting close to it. With the smell of the hay, the smell of the sheep and the snow coming down, all of a sudden I realized where I was. I was in the manger and I almost missed it. I was in this holy place and I might not even have seen it. I happened to see it."

Fred Buechner says, "It seems to me that in a way, you could say that the world itself is a manger where God is continually being born into our lives, into the things that happen to us. Most of the time, if you are like me, you are looking the other way."<sup>2</sup>

We retell this story of Love coming to life, we affirm that each night a child is born is a holy night--because we forget. Too often, we are looking the other way.

The story of Jesus' humble beginnings, his birth in a stable, should remind us that we are never beyond God's love. A hundred years ago, John Henry Newman explained the theology of the nativity this way; he said: "the primary image is that of a very humble God, a God who comes to us unadorned as though naked with nothing but love, never dominating or controlling, simply coming with and as love."<sup>3</sup>

At Christmas, we are not asked to decide whether the story is factually true. We are not required to find the perfect gift in order to prove our love or worth. We are only asked to open our hearts and receive that love which God gives, freely and unconditionally.

You don't have to do anything to earn this love. You are good enough. You are already worthy. This is our Universalist faith--that no one is beyond God's love.

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<sup>2</sup> These words are from the end of an interview with Buechner, available online at <http://www.csec.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/230-frederick-buechner-program-3305>

<sup>3</sup> Found at the blog of the Rev. Buddy Stallings, available online at <http://www.stbarts.org/buddy-stallings-blog/the-delight-of-surprise/>

Christmas asks us to open up our hearts to that Love that only wants to come in and abide with us. To accept this gift. And then, after we've received this blessing, to share it with a world that is hungry for acts of caring and kindness, mercy and justice.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, our God Emmanuel!<sup>4</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Words from *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, by Phillips Brooks.