



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

"Simple Gifts,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 28, 2010

I love Thanksgiving--this stretch of days at the end of November to be with family and friends, to enjoy good food, to have time to read or rake leaves or take a nap or watch sports or a movie on TV. But mostly I love Thanksgiving's reminder to give thanks for what we have been given.

At the interfaith Thanksgiving service last Tuesday night at the Episcopal church, that was the overarching theme--that our lives are a gift from God, and we are called, above all, to be grateful. The readings, from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, reminded us of our human tendency to forget this; to think we have created or earned what we have, that we deserve the good things that come our way.

The Rev. Burton Carley, minister of a UU congregation in Memphis, Tennessee, begins the Sunday service with the words I used this morning: "This is the day we are given. We did not create it or earn it or deserve it." He reminds us that life is a gift that we should not take for granted. But Rev. Carley admits that these words "irritate any number of the people in the congregation. They have told me so," he says. We Americans like to believe we have the power to create our own reality. We like to think that we have earned our good luck, that our striving can somehow protect us from hurt or misfortune. But you know, don't you, that it doesn't work that way? Things happen, without reason. We can't control all the events of our lives. But we do have a choice in how we respond to them.

The lesson of Thanksgiving, our great American holy day, is that it's good to be grateful. For this day we have been given. For these bodies we have been blessed with. For food and friends and shelter and community. I like to think of all the gatherings around tables on Thanksgiving--people coming together to eat a meal, and enjoy one another, and remember those who are absent. Coming together to be grateful. It's a beautiful thing, and good for the soul, and something we could do more than once a year. If you want to be happier, make a practice of being grateful. Every day, express your gratitude, and see what happens.

In the middle of the Thanksgiving holiday came an event so big, the newspaper on Thanksgiving day was particularly heavy. Because of these--loads of circulars, advertising all the sales on Friday, the big start of the holiday shopping season. Now I imagine that some of you went out early on Friday to take advantage of those big sales. I have to tell you it makes me sad that our nation so quickly turns from Thanksgiving one day to uber-shopping the next. The call of Thanksgiving is to bask in the glow of gratitude, not for one day, but for days and days afterward.

To re-member that life is a gift and a blessing. To cherish the time we have. To make the holiday a holy time that nourishes and restores your soul.

If the call of Thanksgiving is to be grateful for what you have, then the message of the Christmas shopping season is just the opposite--that you need this or that thing to be happy and whole, that the only way to show your love for others is to buy them stuff. A core message of religious traditions is that life is a gift and a blessing, but the message of our consumer culture is that you need more than you currently have. Religion teaches us to go deeper where we are, and advertising promises an escape from that tiresome reality.

You see this message, "you deserve a break today," a lot. Selling everything from chocolates to day spas to automobiles, the ads say, "You deserve a bit of indulgence," "Give yourself a moment of pure pleasure." This concoction of sugar and fat, or this hour of pampering, or this beautifully crafted piece of steel and plastic--will make you feel so much better about yourself.

Now, I love chocolate. And I'm all for self-care. And I certainly appreciate good engineering and a safe car to get me from here to there. I'm as hungry as any of you for pleasure and satisfaction. But I don't trust that the people who want to sell me things have any idea of what I'm really hungry for. I know how important it is to feed one's soul. I just don't have much faith that our capitalist economy knows anything about my soul, or yours.

The message that underlies most all advertising is a claim that their product or service will make you happy and whole. You need to buy this, to feel better, or, in this season, to show someone you love them. No matter what you already have, it's not enough. You need more. That's the model our economy is built on--creating desire for new things so people will buy them.

As individuals and as a nation we have been spending more that we can afford, and the recession is part of the price we're paying for that. The recent budget commission offers at least a recognition that we can't continue on this path, without terrible consequences. We spend almost as much on our military as the rest of the world combined. We could solve our budget woes by cutting that back. And this makes more sense to me that cutting programs that feed the hungry or provide services to those most vulnerable. But of course it's not that simple. Most every potential cut in the military budget affects some community that has come to depend on it. It's not that easy to turn swords into plowshares. But we should try.

The truth is, our economy will rebound, at least a bit, if people go out and spend money this season. Employers will begin hiring again as consumer confidence rises. But this approach, to spend our way out of trouble, is not sustainable--for our nation or for our souls. I'm no economist, but I know we are already a country drowning in stuff, much of it stuff that we really don't need. It makes me tired to think of all the effort and expense that goes into producing unnecessary things that eventually end up in attics, or storage units or landfills.

Our Puritan forbears here in New England didn't even celebrate Christmas, because they found no support for it in the Bible, and in colonial days religious leaders were wary of Christmas because holiday celebrations often led to excessive drinking and lawlessness. It was only in the

1920s that merchants began to realize that Christmas provided them an opportunity--an entire season that could be devoted to shopping.

I have no illusions that the commercialization of Christmas is going to change any time soon. If people want to spend their days shopping 'til they drop, taking on debt they can't afford, then they are going to do that. But let's acknowledge that this frenzy of consuming has nothing to do with Christmas--that day when people around the world celebrate the birth of a child named Jesus, a teacher and prophet who promised a new way of living, who said, "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly." But he wasn't talking about an abundance of stuff--he was talking about an abundant life, in which people are more important than possessions. In which we live in right relationship with one another and our earth. Where we are in touch with, as the Methodist minister Ted Loder says, "who we are, and who God is, and who our sisters and brothers are."

The antidote to the Christmas shopping season is the season of Advent, which begins today. Advent is a time for waiting and watching, for quiet contemplation. In these darkening days, it's a time to wonder, "What might be unfolding in my heart and soul right now?" The invitation of Advent is to be quiet enough so that you can hear that still, small voice that is calling your name.

This year we're going to observe Advent by offering a weekly Vespers service at 6 o'clock on Wednesday evenings. We'll gather here in relative darkness, we'll light candles and be quiet together. This simple service will last about half an hour, and we'll have a simple supper afterwards. If you are looking for some quiet in your week, I hope you can join us.

In this season, I encourage you to ask yourself, "What does my heart desire?" Spend some time with that question. It will help you to sort through the competing voices and demands of this season. Ask yourself, "What am I really hungry for? What am I seeking?" These are Advent questions, and if you spend some time with them, they will help you to know what desire, what you really want for Christmas.

I hope you don't hear my skepticism about the commercialization of Christmas as saying we should swear off all material things. Hardly--I just don't want us to be slaves to them. I certainly get pleasure from tangible things, especially books and tools and fishing tackle. One of the best presents I ever received was this one--a 32 oz. Estwing hammer my wife bought for me years ago. It feels good in the hand, it drives a nail like nobody's business, and I love that, early in our marriage, she bought me this manly hammer; that she believed I was strong enough to use it.

Think about the gifts that you have given and received over the years that have meant something to you. Some of the best gifts are the most simple ones, given with thought and care and love.

What we sang a few minutes ago is true--it is a gift to be simple, to be free, to come down to where you ought to be. The life of simplicity opens us to depths the cluttered life knows nothing about. Where you can listen for your heart's desire, and learn your own sweet song.

There's nothing wrong with desire. Our deepest desires are holy ones, that tell us what we really care about, what we are seeking. The problem comes when we let people who want to sell us something get inside our heads, and make us believe that our real desires are for this or that object, that buying something will fix a relationship or will mend a broken heart.

What does your heart desire? I hope you will spend this Advent season pondering that question. Beneath the noise and the hurry of these days, I suspect what you may be seeking are simple gifts.

My prayer for you this Advent is that you will be open to the waiting and the watching. That in these darkening days you will embrace the season's invitation to be still, even as the world around us moves faster and faster. That your seeking will itself be a blessing, and enough.

Amen.