



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Work of Christmas,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 2, 2011

Do you know that it's still Christmas? That the Christmas season, at least in the church calendar, continues until January 6, which is Epiphany, the day that marks the arrival of the three kings to visit the baby Jesus with their gifts. When I was a kid, my mom always insisted that we keep our Christmas tree up until January 6, and we have adopted that tradition too. It's nice to have a tree in the house for a couple of weeks. Of course, we didn't get it up until the Sunday before Christmas.

I like thinking of Christmas as a season, and not just a one day observance. Though I understand how you might be ready to get back to normal after all the festivities. But the parties, the spending, the overindulging, all the encouragement to be cheerful, these things are all part of the cultural and commercial Christmas. What I'm talking about is the season of the church year that tells the story of the birth of Jesus, that celebrates the incarnation, the connection between God and humans, between heaven and earth. Right now I want and need to hear Howard Thurman's words to remind me that the spirit of Christmas, of love among us, of the call to bring God's peace into the world, is our work in these days.

Do you know about Howard Thurman? He was born in 1899, on the eve of the 20th century, and grew up in Florida, raised by his grandmother, who had been a slave. He attended Morehouse College, where he was valedictorian, and then seminary, and was ordained a Baptist minister. He studied philosophy with the Quakers, became the dean of the chapel at Howard University and later at Marsh Chapel at Boston University. He wrote 20 books, traveled widely, and was the person who brought Ghandi's principles of nonviolence to the United States. His most influential work was his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in 1949, in which he articulated a theology of liberation, bringing together the gospel accounts of Jesus with non-violent resistance to racism and oppression.

At the time, Thurman was seen by many African Americans as the one who would lead the struggle for civil rights in our country. But he chose a different path, one that left active involvement in the movement to younger leaders so he could pursue his own longings toward deeper spirituality and mysticism. Doing this, he disappointed many in the Black community, who wanted and expected him to be the Moses of the Civil Rights Movement.¹

¹ Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes, Noank Baptist Church, Noank, CT, 7 January 2007.

I've shared this quote from Howard Thurman with you before: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." It can take courage to do this. Because you likely will disappoint some people, who have other ideas about what you ought to be doing. I suspect that Howard Thurman knew, deep down, what his work was to do, and he followed that path, rather than the one others expected him to take.

Many of us have some heroic ideas of what we might do with this one life we have been given. You may have some ideas of what you ought to be doing, if you only were a better, more courageous, more faithful person. But the heroic may not be what is ours to do. As a young minister, Frederick Buechner thought if he was more faithful then he would give up his possessions and be a missionary, working with impoverished people in Asia or Africa. Even though part of him thought he ought to do this dramatic and heroic thing, on a deeper level he realized that he didn't really want to. Buechner says he came to understand that he would be a lousy missionary, and he needed to lead the life that was his, not his heroic ideal, or someone else's idea of what he should do. And as a writer and preacher his has been a powerful and influential voice.

Though Howard Thurman chose a more contemplative path in his later years, and though Frederick Buechner practices his ministry primarily through the word, both spoken and written, neither could be accused of adopting a private, individualized spirituality. Nor would they say that we are called to choose between a private and a public spirituality. Their lives remind us that contemplation leads to deeper connections and service to others.

Buechner understands this is not easy. He says, "There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a), but probably aren't helping your patients much either. Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."²

The place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. Have you found that place in your life? Are you looking for it? And where might that be in the life of this congregation?

You know what Howard Thurman says. It was our reading this morning. But his words bear repeating:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*.

When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoners,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

In Thurman's words I hear echoes of the Hebrew prophets, who said the spirit of God calls us to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to help the blind see and the oppressed find freedom (Isaiah 61:1). Who ask, what does God require of you but to love justice, and do acts of mercy, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)?

There is so much good work for us to be doing. What is it that will both make your heart glad, and will help someone else? How can you carry on the work of Christmas--to bring more love, and more justice and more peace into our world? This is not a question to answer in a minute, but rather, something to meditate on in the coming days and weeks. To that end, we made an insert for today's order of service, with Thurman's words on one side, and Buechner's on the other. I encourage you to take it home, and put it in a place where you will see it every day. Take some time, every day, to think on, and meditate on, your own vocation. What are you being called to do and to be, in these days? What makes your own heart glad? And where does that intersect with the world's great need? Let's have conversations here about what is stirring in our souls, and what is bubbling up in our midst. Let me know if you are interested in sharing a testimonial about your calling, about how the spirit is moving in your life, and how you are responding to it.

At the start of a new year, this is good work for us to be doing, as individuals and as a community. What might we be about in these days? A little over a month ago, I went down to my hometown, Charlotte, NC, for the dedication of a new organ at the church where I grew up. My mom has been on the organ committee there for years, and this was the culmination of a lot of work for them, and she asked me and my brother and sister to come for the celebration, and we did. Folks down there were curious about our congregation here, and I was glad to tell them about you, and share with them how happy I am here. In one of those conversations, I said something that surprised me as the words came out of my mouth. Talking about this church, I said, "I have this sense that we are on the verge of doing some new thing, and I have no idea what that will be."

The work of Christmas--to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoners, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart--this is our work. In this season, and all the year 'round. It's why we are here, why we are gathered together as a community--to minister to on another, and to the world outside our doors. To ask ourselves, "What is the part I am going to play?" What am I called to do and be in these days?"

You may already have things you want to do in this new year, goals you have set for yourself. But I tell you, to make the time to listen for your own calling, to discern, both on your own and in community with others, what makes your heart glad and how you might bring more love and more justice into the world, there is no more important work than this.

None of us can do everything. But we each can do something. What might you do, this year, in your life? What might we do together?

My prayer is that you will seek and find your authentic vocation, your particular way to be glad and do good. That we will be a community helping and encouraging this. Who knows what is unfolding, even now, in our midst? Who knows what we are capable of?

Amen.