

“Happy Holy Days,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on December 5, 2009

I love this time of year. Thursday night, while the Merrimack Valley String Orchestra was rehearsing in the Murray Room, making their joyful sound, and I was in the church office, praying over the photocopier, three elves slipped in here--their names are Maggie, Di and Janet--and changed our sanctuary into the lovely setting you see here today.

I love the tradition of bringing evergreens indoors at this time of year, when so many plants appear to have died; lighting candles and kindling fires to warm these long dark nights. I love the idea of snow at Christmas, though I have to say I hope we don't have as many snowy Sundays as we did last year! And I love the music of this season--on my drive home Thursday night, I took up one of my December rituals--listening to a recording of Handel's long oratorio *Messiah*, and trying to sing the tenor part. And last night, it was a joy to gather here with some of you to share a meal and sing carols together.

Even with its crass commercialism, the pressure to shop, shop, shop, the inevitable reminders of what is broken and missing that are especially apparent this time of year, I do love this season, and particularly Advent, with its call to wait and prepare what what may come.

But do you know that this season is under attack? That there's a war on Christmas? I'm talking about the annual expressions of indignation that some people say “happy holidays” rather than wishing you a merry Christmas, and that some retailers, in trying to appeal to the many folks who are not Christian, use that word “holiday” as a more inclusive stand-in.

As one who loves Advent and Christmas, who considers himself a liberal, Universalist Christian, I have to say that I find all this a bit silly. That Christians, who are the dominant religion in our country, feel they are somehow victims or are being oppressed by minority religions or secular folks, is (and I mean this in the nicest way possible) pathetic. The so-called “War on Christmas” is a self-serving manufactured controversy fueled by a couple of TV personalities and a fundamentalist Christian organization for the purpose, not of restoring Christmas, but advancing their own self-interest.

Writing about this, one newspaper columnist wonders, “Why, for example, is the phrase “Happy holidays” so insufferable to Christian fundamentalists, but not the vulgar, surfeiting exploitation of Christ's name to sell smokeless ashtrays, dessert

toppings, Droid phones and trampolines? I'm not a theologian but I think the Gospels are pretty clear that Jesus was no fan of merchants.”¹

The fact that some Christians spend their time and energy trying to get commercial retailers to use the word Christmas instead of the more generic word holiday seems crazy to me. They are helping to conflate the holy part of Christmas with the cultural celebration that has more to do with Santa Claus and stores than Jesus, that's more about presents under the tree than the presence of God among us.

I do get that religious people can feel discouraged by political correctness and the ways secular society can try to water down religious expressions. I even understand how Christians may feel threatened by the fact that we don't live in a Christian nation anymore, if we ever did. As Diana Eck, who leads Harvard's Pluralism Project, observes, the United States is now the world's most religiously diverse nation. There are more American Muslims than there are American Episcopalians, Jews, or Presbyterians.

At the Post Office where I go and stand in line at least once or twice in December, there's a postal clerk who wears a tie tack that reads, "Jesus is the reason for the season." Yes, Jesus is the reason for the seasons of Advent, and Christmas, which doesn't actually begin until December 25, and lasts until January 6. But Jesus is not the reason for the broader holiday season--not the reason for shopping, not the reason for solstice celebrations, and though he was a Jew, certainly not the reason for Hanukkah. I find it unseemly, to say the least, when Christians want to make it all about them. "C'mon," I want to say. "Give me a break--you already get a Federal holiday for Christmas, the culture broadly observes your holidays, can't you make room in your heart for folks who are different--and not be threatened by those who want to celebrate in their own way?" Of course, there are plenty of Christians who think this is as silly as I do.

Today is the second Sunday in Advent. Hanukkah begins at sundown this Friday. The shortest day of the year, the Winter Solstice, and the celebration of Yule, is just two weeks away. These days are a rich time to gather with family and friends, to gather as a faith community, to sing and be silent, to watch and wait, to be open to the wonder of it all.

Yes, Jesus is the reason for the Advent and Christmas seasons. But commerce is the reason for what I call the cultural celebration of Christmas. There are really two Christmases that get celebrated in our culture. Jesus is the reason for one, Santa Claus for the other. The reason for the Solstice season, which calls one to be attuned to the natural cycles of light and dark, birth and death, is the miraculous relationship of our earth has with universe, the dance of planets and stars. God's miraculous presence to

¹ See article by Dan Neal in the *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 2009: <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-ct-neil17-2009nov17,0,2040716.story>

the Hebrew people in their struggles to survive in a harsh and hostile environment is the reason for the Hanukkah season. There's not one holiday season, as that that tie tack at the Post Office asserts, but a number of overlapping seasons.

They overlap in our lives as well. Some of you have parents or who come from different traditions, or you live with someone of a different faith. So you may celebrate both Hanukkah and Christmas. Or you may say, "I grew up culturally Christian, and we get a Christmas tree, but my practice is more Buddhist, or Pagan. You may be someone who came out of a particular tradition which enriches and informs your faith as Unitarian Universalist, where we affirm one God, and nobody left behind.

My point is, even though religious traditions have things in common, and even though they overlap in our culture and in our individual lives, they are particular and not the same. Hanukkah is not a Jewish Christmas. It's good to be aware that Christianity borrowed widely from and assimilated earlier Pagan traditions. These greens in here, though we might call them Christmas decorations, are Pagan in origin.

On Thanksgiving, my teenage son likes to pile his plate with turkey, dressing and mashed potatoes, and a vegetable if he has to, and then cover the whole thing in gravy. It is an undifferentiated pile of deliciousness, he would tell you. This works better for Thanksgiving dinner than it does for the so-called holiday season. The way to go deep is to know who you are and where you stand; to root yourself primarily in one tradition, to name and claim your spot there, and then, if you like, to supplement your diet with things from other traditions.

My only problem with saying "Happy Holidays" is that it doesn't celebrate anything in particular. It feels like an effort to avoid offending anyone. The columnist Dave Barry has something to say about this. He says, "In the old days, it was not called the Holiday Season; the Christians called it 'Christmas' and went to church; the Jews called it 'Hanukkah' and went to synagogue; the atheists went to parties and drank. People passing each other on the street would say 'Merry Christmas!' or 'Happy Hanukkah!' or (to the atheists) 'Look out for the wall!'" He continues, "These days, people say 'Season's Greetings,' which, when you think about it, means nothing. It's like walking up to somebody and saying 'Appropriate Remark' in a loud, cheerful voice. But 'Season's Greetings' is safer, because it does not refer to any actual religion. Some day, I imagine, even 'Season's Greetings' will be considered too religious, and we'll celebrate the Holiday Season by saying 'Have a nice day.'"²

Earlier this year, Harvard Diana Eck of the Pluralism Project, who happens to be a Methodist, spoke at the installation of the new minister at a big UU church in New York City. To those gathered there she said, "The world has need of your theology. In a world divided by race, and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a church like

² This quote available at <http://www.davebarry.com/misccol/christmas.htm>

yours—committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor, and service to humanity—is a beacon. Be bold in proclaiming it!”

The world doesn’t need us to walk around saying “Appropriate Remark.” Neither will that satisfy our longing for connection, for depth, for meaning, for the presence of God. I encourage you to remember that the origin of “holiday” is “holy day”—this season is for touching what is sacred, for experiencing the presence of the holy. As you make your plans and choices this month, ask yourself, does this help make it a holy day? Does it make me, and others, happy? If not, then why do it? There are all kinds of messages this month about what you should and ought to be doing. Please make the time to listen for that quieter voice, the one that arises from your own soul, because it will help you to find your way to the heart of what is holy and real. Then be bold in celebrating your traditions, and be glad that others can boldly celebrate theirs.

I can’t think of Christmas Eve without remembering where I grew up, St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, in downtown Charlotte, NC. My dad grew up there too, as did his father. Our family sat in the front pew every Sunday. My brother and I were acolytes, or altar boys, and my mom subbed for the organist when he went on vacation. When I was in high school, my parents got divorced and my dad quickly remarried, and for a couple of years we weren’t in church on Christmas Eve. That first year, reeling from my dad’s departure, my mom took us on a trip out of town, so we wouldn’t have to be home for Christmas. The next year, it was my dad’s turn, so we celebrated with his new new family.

Finally my sister and I, both in college now, decided we wanted to go back to St. Peter’s on Christmas Eve. We didn’t sit in our old pew, but found a spot further back. The church seemed like it had always been--the people, the readings, the carols were the same. But everything had changed. My family as I knew it was gone, and was not coming back. Adults that I thought had their lives together were, I now saw, as clueless and confused as I was. Sitting there in that church where it looked like nothing had changed, I was bowled over by all that I had loved, and taken for granted, that was now lost. Singing those carols, hearing those familiar readings, tears ran down my face as I cried for what had been lost. In that place, in the beauty and the wonder of that night, they were good and holy tears.

That church, on that night, offered a place where I could touch what was gone, and what remained; where I could be in the presence of what was holy and real. In this season I am on-my-knees grateful for music, and for family; for church, and for companions, who remind me that life is precious, that God comes to us in unexpected ways, that these are holy days we are living in, if we will but notice.

May this season be for you a time of peace and beauty, of joy and solace, a time that is holy and good. Happy holy days to you, my beloved. Amen.