

Holiday Homily

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ December 23, 2007

I've been looking at the vast number of holidays during this season and thinking about how they, particularly Christmas, developed. Did you know that there are over three dozen holidays linked to the winter solstice?

What makes this time of year so special, so popular?¹

Environmentally, we could note that in many parts of the world, winter is the cold season. For years, cold weather meant that animals could now be slaughtered for food. You see, during most of the year, very little meat was consumed for, if animals were killed, the meat could not be safely stored and it would spoil quickly. Often folks were close to starvation. Cold weather meant the arrival of an extended time to eat meat. Cold weather meant that the harvests which folks had struggled with throughout the growing season was finally in. This was the most plentiful time of the year for food. Additionally, beer and wine were now sufficiently fermented for consumption. Couple these wonderful coincidences with the fact that, in an agricultural community, the coming days were a time for rest, when not much work needed to be done. For the next few months there would be time for rest, reflection, catching up and planning. It is no wonder that the harvest parties got pretty wild.

The intense revelry of the season does not negate the more somber aspects of the holiday traditions, but it is always possible for the revelry to become unbalanced, and go beyond what is felt reasonable.

Such was true of the Puritans in America. The Puritans felt that the Protestant Reformation had not gone far enough and wanted a strict interpretation of the Bible. Many were Calvinists and, given the Calvinistic theology, it is not too hard to predict how the Puritans might feel about the hearty celebrations characteristic of Christmas. They envisioned a different type of society in America. So, as the early leaders of this great nation, they outlawed the celebration of Christmas and made practicing it punishable by a five schilling fine.² "They made a particular point of keeping the courts and public offices open throughout the season. It was to be just another workday."³

As you might expect, it was difficult even for the Puritans to take the partying out of Christmas and the festivities continued despite laws and complaints. In fact, with the industrial revolution, the crush of urbanization and unemployment violence became an unwelcome element of the celebrations. We won't dwell here; rather our task is to find out what was done to change the consequences of highly charged, alcoholic induced destructive group actions in the name of merriment?

In steps Clement C. Moore, a professor of Oriental and Greek literature at Columbia University, who, in 1823, wrote a poem called "A Visit from St. Nicholas." Some say that this one poem, which gave parents a vision of what Christmas was supposed to look like, created an entire mythology which has been used in this country as a model for the perfect Christmas ever since. It suggested Santa in a red suit, reindeer complete with names, and stockings filled to the brim. Popularly, we now know this poem as "Twas The Night Before Christmas." The enormity of the influence of *Twas the Night Before Christmas* is hard to imagine. Within ten years, gift giving had once again become a tradition. Soon,

¹ See Nussenbaum, Steven *The Battle for Christmas* for background.

² Spero, Ellen Rowse "Creating Christmas" Sermon 12/14/03 First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Chelmsford MA .

³ Robinson, Christine "An American History of Christmas" Sermon 12/16/07 First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque.NM.

instead of complaints about the over hearty partying of the adults, the new Puritan complaint was against selfishness and greed, consumerism corrupting the children.

What to do now? Enter the Christmas tree. Unitarian minister Charles Follen of Lexington MA began setting up a Christmas tree in 1835.⁴ This was a tradition of his native Germany and he wanted his son Charley to see its beauty. Two of his Unitarian friends, Harriet Martineau and Catharine Sedgwick both wrote about the beautiful tree which was unveiled on Christmas Eve, Harriet from the vantage point of a quaint New England tradition and Catharine through her children's stories. It was hoped that the tree and not gifts would become the central "surprise" of the holiday. It was also hoped that gift giving on the part of the children would become just as important as gift receiving.

So this is what the Unitarians did to bring Christmas back to its religious roots. And the lesson here is strong and evident. All too often we put something down as a negative influence, only to find out that its inspiration was a worthy one. Casting St. Nick as a jolly old, caring man, was an attempt not to commercialize Christmas but, rather, to return to the custom of joyous celebration of family and bounty. And that it did, but then, for some, bounty became the most important element. Santa was followed by the advent of the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree was supposed to bring back a sense of mystery, surprise and awe to the season, which it did, before it was commercialized, perhaps beyond repair. The beautiful candles professing our procession from darkness to light has turned into a Hollywood extravaganza of competitive commercialism.

Constantly, we attempt to return to our religious roots. We remind ourselves of the "reason for the season" and try mightily to balance our values with the festival of celebration. It is hard work! Yet, it is our work and it is important work. Am I speaking now of Christmas, or Chanukah, Ramadan, or Kwanzaa? All of them. We must constantly strive to modify our traditions so that they are meaningful in the current context. How do we do that? There are no answers, yet it is our task.

As we close this service, let us include the work of one more Unitarian minister, Edmund Hamilton Sears. Do you recognize that name? Rev. Sears was an abolitionist who was strongly opposed to the Mexican-American War. He wanted to use Christmas as an opportunity to extend God's love to a war torn world. His weariness and depression is palpable in his popular carol "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." Let us rise now and sing this beautiful hymn, #244 in your hymnal.

⁴ Robinson, op.cit, p. 5.