

Glad Tidings of Great Joy

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This is probably the kind of thing a minister should keep to herself, but whenever I read the opening verses of the second chapter of the gospel according to Luke, I see in my mind Linus standing in a spotlight on a darkened stage in a school auditorium, and I hear Linus's voice.

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their sheep by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

In the world of Charles Schulz, Linus's account of the angel's words is prophetic. In the end, great joy, and peace and good-will do descend on the Peanuts gang—in the form of a Christmas tree revived by a security blanket, and a group of unkind children embracing an outcast and lifting their voices in song. But what about in our world? We, too, repeat the angel's words year after year, sometimes in our own reading of Luke, more often in our singing of carols that recount the tidings of great joy. Yet are they meant for us?

Was a child born to us last night, as Gladys the Angel of the Lord declared at the end of our candle-lighting service? Are good tidings of great joy ours this morning?

The secular Christmas, so the popular wisdom goes, is all about the *gimme*. About individual desires and the often futile attempt to satisfy our loved ones' *gimmes* with material goods. Letters to Santa that are now delivered electronically. Recitations of wish lists on Santa's lap. Charlie Brown's little sister Sally writing to Santa with her request for cash; Eartha Kitt's oh so seductive Christmas list (a sable, a '54 convertible, the deed to a platinum mine), Ralphie's plea for a Red Ryder BB gun.

I'd like to argue, this Christmas morning, that there is no truth to this notion. That even for secular Christians Christmas isn't all about the *gimme*. But recent research out of Stanford suggests that indeed it may be. Gift recipients report greater satisfaction when given gifts they requested than when given expensive or thoughtful gifts that were NOT on their wish list. Only the givers report more satisfaction giving thoughtful, creative, non-requested gifts.

This *gimme* attitude is one of the primary reasons so many folks cite for hating Christmas. The real "reason for the season" gets lost, they mourn, under the layers of commercialism and greed and one-up-man's-ship. Gone is any true sense of wonder, of worship. A friend, remarking on the anonymous givers who paid for lay-away items at WalMart's across the country this season, asked on Facebook what her friends are doing to share their own personal wealth with others who might be in need. And one replied: *How about helping others with necessities (like fuel and food and housing) in January-October? Not paying off "stuff" for "unwrapping" on Dec. 25?*

What, the implied question is, does "*stuff for unwrapping*" have to do with the miraculous birth of God in human form. A human form destined to shake up the power structures of his time and prophesied to bring peace on earth. The sacred Christmas, in seeming stark contrast to the secular Christmas, is all about the ultimate gift--freely given, unasked for and unexpected and unimaginable in its form. No *gimme*. Just love incarnate. A gift worthy of glad tidings of great joy.

Leaving aside the discordant clashing of sacred and secular for a moment, I'm among those who hailed the Stanford study as particularly discouraging news. I like to think of myself as a creative and amazingly thoughtful gift giver, specializing in the "unexpected but just right". How can it be that these spontaneous offerings of mine are viewed as *less* thoughtful and *less* personal than an item I simply pluck off a recipient's list and present wrapped in paper that has become a cheap disguise for what we both know is within?

Yet I was delighted last year to receive from my sister, sister-in-law and mom ten tubes of the same shade of lipstick. I've been burned before, you see, by a lipstick manufacturer discontinuing my signature shade, so when I discovered a new shade I love, I let it be known far and wide that all I wanted for Christmas and my birthday last year was Revlon #663, Va Va Violet.

And my mom, my sister, my sister-in-law, listened and loved me enough to give me exactly what I asked for. Not something extravagant or expensive or wildly creative. Just what I wanted. So I've been forced to consider a bit more carefully the Stanford

study. And I've come to the realization that giving what a loved one asks for is a means of acknowledging that he or she knows best what his/her heart desires--better even than I! Hard as that is to believe!

The true gift isn't the item itself but the recognition and respect of self-knowledge that the item represents. That is to say, when Kathy and Tammy and Mom gave me all those lipsticks what they really gave me was a message: we don't quite understand who you are and what you are all about, but *you* know who you are and we love you, so we trust that what you've asked for is what you need.

Each of us wants what we want-at Christmas and throughout the year. We're taught that that is a bad thing. We've learned that self is a bad word and that the other must always be considered first. It is better to give than to receive, above all at Christmas. So despite the gimme reputation the secular Christmas has, in reality it is hard for us to admit our secret heart's desire, to ask for what we truly need.

None of us knows anyone else with as much depth and clarity as we might like-not even those closest to us, as familiar as our own names, as beloved our own breath. We can't divine the inner workings of their hearts, guess their secret fears, discover their unspoken desires. But we can listen to their words. And we can trust their self-knowledge. And we can love freely enough to put what we learn when we listen ahead of our own good ideas and creative gestures no matter how well intentioned. Even Santa only gets it right 99.9% of the time. We can't expect to do better but listening and paying attention and acting on what we hear and observe can only improve our odds.

Christmas gift giving is about over for this year. Some of you probably opened presents last night. Others already this morning. Still others will go home for the grand gift opening after church. I hope somewhere in the packages this year you discovered just the thing you asked for. And I hope somewhere in the packages this year you gave someone else just the thing he or she asked for. But if neither were the case, all is not lost.

In our tradition, in Unitarian Universalism, we believe either everyone (including but not limited to Jesus) is the son or daughter of the divine or no one is. So, here's what glad tidings of great joy mean to me this Christmas morning: unto each of us, unto all of us, a child is born, last night, this morning and every day. And that child, the child who is you, and you and you, who is me, that child is the divine in human form. That child possesses a well of self-knowledge so deep and so true and so wise as to change the world. He, she, you can ask for what you want: relative pronouns, a chameleon, lipstick in just the right shade, political asylum, a living wage, healing, reconciliation, a child to

love, food on the table, for no to be accepted as no, an education, a service man's/service woman's safe return, a home of one's own.

Imagine the power and the possibility in all those hearts' desires! Especially if we begin a practice of listening to one another and giving, as well as we are able, what is asked for!

If we get really good at listening and responding, if we give our mother-in-law gardening gloves when she asks for gardening gloves, then maybe eventually she'll trust us enough to tell us one birthday or mother's day or Christmas that what she wants is for all her grandchildren to join her on a peace march. If we give our brother a batch of home-made dill pickles when he asks for home-made dill pickles, then maybe one year he'll tell us what he really wants is help reconciling with his estranged daughter. If we give our child the requested concert tickets, then maybe one year he/she will be able to ask that we call him/her by her true name, that one that speaks to his/her genuine identity.

Maybe, if more often than not, we give people what they ask for, disappointments and resentments will melt. Maybe, if more often than not, we give people what they ask for, we will all start asking more boldly and more truly. Maybe, if more often than not, we give people what they ask for, they and we will find ourselves awash in the knowledge that we are loved and valued for who we are at our core.

What great joy will then be released into the world!