



Christmas, 1835

A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE

December 20, 2009

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, politics or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are

moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said. If you have something to share, please come forward, tell us your name and what's on your mind.



Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

Please rise now and greet your neighbors at the door. Welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

HYMN 73, Chant for the Seasons (Winter)

GREETINGS

ERIC. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. There is an emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode" and childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery.

If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

I remind you that right here in the sanctuary, you have the opportunity of walking a labyrinth this afternoon at 5 pm. Dez and her minions have laid out the pattern, it will be illuminated by candle light and the atmosphere will be reflective and meditative. I hope you can join us this afternoon, or tomorrow, if you have other plans for today.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

MINISTER. In a moment, *THE CHATTANUUGANS* and Charlotte's Bells will bring you a seasonal song that was adapted and arranged by Kate Briere. But before they do, I must say something about the choir and the bell choir. They have been doing some excellent work, as you will hear in a moment and on Christmas Eve. We must credit Dez Papendorp, Jay McCurdy and Wendy Sapp for their work in preparing the bell choir. And we are very grateful to Nicole Barnhart for making our stoles and Maddie Kertay for underwriting the project.

What all these people have done is create a sound, a look and a lot of good music for us. To say that I am proud of our music program doesn't really capture my emotions at this point. I am proud, happy, awed, jubilant, dazzled, euphoric, elated and knocked out all at once. I am not "pleasantly surprised."

For several weeks, *THE CHATTANUUGANS* have rehearsed up here before the Sunday service and Charlotte's Bells have rehearsed downstairs. A couple weeks ago they sang and rang together for the first time. Today they bring you "Ding Dong, Merrily on High."

PRELUDE: Ding Dong

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Our chalice lighting this morning comes from John Hanley Morgan.
Your words are in italics.

The gray clouds cluster,
Colder blows the wind:
*Darkness comes early to the land:
It is December.*

The snows of winter gleam,
Sleet's iron fist descends.
*We move in darkness: solstice.
Therefore make ready with the Light!*

Light of star, light of candle,
Firelight, lamplight, love light.
*These little lights can guide us,
And bring a steady peace*

As we move toward Christmas morn,
And joy again the sun's release!

Labyrinths & Christmas

I hear that some of you have been working on the labyrinth, is that right? You put this together the other day. That's great and thank you for doing that.

Last week I wanted to show you some pictures of different labyrinths and I couldn't do it. But this week, I can. So here they are.

This is a maze. You go in this door at the bottom and you find your way through the maze until you get to the door at the top and you can go out. Along the way, you can go right or go left or go back. You

have choices. It's a big puzzle.

This is the form of the classical labyrinth in Crete. This is the oldest style of labyrinth we have.

You go in at the bottom down here, and slowly walk and follow the path until you get to the center. At the center, there may be a book, a flower, or maybe a drink of water. And then you turn around and go back the way you came to the entrance. The point of the labyrinth is not to find your way out, like a maze, but to focus your thoughts, to meditate or contemplate. It's quiet and peaceful.

The Romans designed their own style of labyrinth. It's square and it's proportions are regular. You can slice off the corners and make another version, but it's still a Roman style labyrinth. You can expand it and give it ears, like this one in Reims, France. Or you can make it circular, like this one, at the cathedral in Lyon, France. And here is one with only three lobes and no corners.

People build labyrinths outdoors, too like this one, made of hedges on hillside in England. Or this one, made of stones.

The most famous labyrinth is this one, and it's in the cathedral at Chartres, in France. It was built about 750 years ago. This is a photo of the labyrinth as it looks in the church. And here are some people walking the labyrinth.

I want to thank you for working on the labyrinth here in this cathedral and I hope you enjoy it.

I also want to ask you a question. Now at this time of year we hear one question over and over. Do you know what it is? What question do we hear a lot at Christmas?

“What do you want for Christmas?” Has anyone asked you that?

Well my question for you is, “What are you going to give for Christmas?” I don’t mean that you should recite a list of every gift you are giving people. I mean, is there one gift you can give everyone?

I’ll tell you what I am giving everyone. I am giving everyone my patience. I am inclined to be impatient, to want things done right away, and done the way I think they should be done. Life doesn’t always give me immediate satisfaction, and that makes me even more impatient.

So my gift to everyone is that I’ll be more patient. And this is the gift that keeps on giving, you know? I understand that the more I give my patience, the more patient I will be all year long.

So what can you give everyone at Christmas? A smile? Kind words? Friendship. Love.

Well, I hope that you and your family have a Merry Christmas. You can go to your classes now.

CHILDREN’S RECESSONAL

We hold you in our love
as you go, as you go.
May your heart
be at peace as you go.

To nurture the spark
of your precious life
we hold you in our love
as you go.

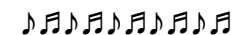
OFFERTORY: Toyland

You might not know it, but this church keeps a fund to help people out when they need it. In the past year or so the fund has been tapped to pay rent for someone out of work, buy gasoline, food or clothing, repair a car, and restore a donation to the Nature Center that had been stolen. We also purchase Bi-Lo gift cards for panhandlers who show up here.

The fund is administered at the discretion of the minister and if you have a need, I encourage you to ask me for help. Disbursals are anonymous. In the absence of the minister, one member of the Board of Trustees has authority to use the fund to help people out.

The fund is not part of the budget. It is replenished only by donations. Right now, the fund has about \$600 in it. For the past several years, we have made an appeal on the Sunday nearest Christmas to replenish the fund. So this morning we will share the plate with the fund.

We will now collect the morning offering for this fund. If you have an pledge payment, please mark it as such. Otherwise, all contributions will be deposited in this fund. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Christina, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

Dottie Antman is doing some better, but she's not back to where she was before she was hospitalized. She is now at Manorhouse Assisted Living on Mountain Creek Road. If you want to visit her, see me after the service for her new address.

At this time of year, it's nice to find reason to feel hopeful. District of Columbia Mayor Adrian Fenty signed a marriage equality bill into law on Friday. Fenty signed the legislation at a public ceremony held at All Souls Church, Unitarian. Thank you, Mayor Fenty and the people of DC.

Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. That's one of the things that made him a radical. Another of his sayings was "Turn the other cheek." And "Render unto Caesar..."

Maybe this is what makes some people believe Jesus was divine. Because as a human being, I find it very hard—you might say impossible—to pray for my persecutors. Interesting theory, Jesus. Sorry I don't measure up.

The best I can muster for my enemies and persecutors is that I will leave them alone and hope they leave me alone. I don't actively hope and pray that they will be unhappy or fail in their endeavors or die. It's more like I just wish they'd see things differently. Maybe that's a gentle prayer.

These thoughts came to me this week when I read that Oral Roberts died. What can a Unitarian Universalist minister say about Oral Roberts? I disagree with his theology and his politics. I think the policies at his university in Tulsa are backward-looking and counter-productive. He didn't know me, and I only know him as a public figure. But I'll bet he wouldn't have liked my theology or politics, either.

I wonder if he loved his enemies. I wonder if he prayed for them. Actually, I know the answer to that question. He undoubtedly prayed that his enemies would forswear their godless ways, repent and get right with God. Of course he would have prayed that his enemies get right with God on his terms. Oral Robert's terms, not God's terms.

So I had to ask myself, do I pray for my enemies? Well, not like Oral Roberts prayed for his, I'm sure of that. And I never prayed for Oral Roberts while he was alive, I'm sure of that. But now that he's no longer my enemy, I feel like I ought to offer a prayer for him.

So here's my gentle prayer for Oral Roberts: Goodbye, Oral. Take it easy.

I think I ought to pray for Garrison Keillor, too. He went off on Unitarians in a post to <salon.com> this week. He was upset that our hymnal has modified some lyrics to some, as he called them, "Christian songs." He was referring to Christmas carols. He inferred that if you ain't Christian, you shouldn't even be singing these carols. He actually wrote these words:

If you don't believe Jesus was God, OK, go write your own damn "Silent Night" and leave ours alone. This is spiritual piracy and cultural elitism and we Christians have stood for it long enough.

Christmas is a Christian holiday -- if you're not in the club, then buzz off. Celebrate Yule instead or dance around in druid robes for the solstice. Go light a big log, go wassailing and falalaing until you fall down, eat figgy pudding until you puke, but don't mess with the Messiah.

To which I replied that Christmas is so far beyond a Christian holiday that it doesn't matter anymore who sings what words at this time of year. Christmas is not only for Christians.

And my colleague, Tom Schade put it best when he wrote,

Christians used to maintain that the birth of the savior had at least the potential of saving all of humanity. But some Christians are retreating into tribalism in the face of a dynamic and diverse secular global culture.

I will preach this meaning of the birth of Jesus this season: a winter festival that reminds us that what we hope for will come from the most unexpected places (a poor baby), in sudden and seemingly miraculous reversals (light in the darkest hour, kings worshiping in stables, virgin births), and be incarnated in acts of generosity, kindness and hospitality.

We tell of a salvation that spreads from hand to hand like the candlelight in a darkened sanctuary on Christmas Eve. Garrison Keillor's tribal Christmas is withering; ours is blossoming. Ours is a truer embodiment of the spirit of Jesus than his. He is an old man, shouting at the kids to "Get Off My Lawn."

And so here's my gentle prayer for Garrison Keillor: Merry Christmas, Garrison. Take it easy.

We received a message from the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. Peter Morales. In part it reads,

My favorite childhood memories involve Christmas pageants, a series of large and boisterous inter-generational family gatherings, and, of course, my Tía Amelia's wonderful tamales.

The presents I received and gave have long since faded from memory. The relationships remain. The stuff is long gone. The love endures.

I encourage you to be with your own most precious memories of the holidays. Experience the love and joy once again. Our most precious

memories have much to teach us. Our most cherished experiences are much more than nostalgia; they are religious teachers. Remembering is a spiritual practice.

Love endures. Relationships really matter. In the long run, stuff doesn't matter.

If we lived our lives with this in mind, we would nurture relationships with people we love. We would create religious communities that foster intimacy, and we would truly open our hearts to the newcomer.

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

In this time of silence, let us hold close to our hearts those who are lonely or alone at this time of year, those who are cold or without a place to go, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place

We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

SERMON: Christmas, 1835

Can I have a show of hands, please? Will you have a Christmas tree this year? Will it be in your living room? Will you put presents on it or under it? Will you have young children in the house?

That's about what I expected. It may interest you to know that Christmas trees and the attendant activities were promoted in this country by Unitarians. A decorated Christmas tree in a living room or parlor; presents and young children as the focus. A perfect little Unitarian Christmas.

What I bring you this morning is a story of tradition devised to assuage the consciences and appeal to the sensibilities of New Englanders who were outraged at the shameful holiday behavior of revelers and the creeping commercialism of Christmas. This story is comprised of several strands that come together in 1835 to set Christmas on its present path of commercial hoopla and excessive zeal. It's ironic that what those New England Unitarians wanted for Christmas is not at all what they got. In fact, what they got was more of what they were trying to prevent.

For this story I am indebted to Stephen Nissenbaum and his book, *The Battle for Christmas*.

Anyone here remember the year 1835? I thought not. Me, neither. But after today, you won't forget it, because that's where our story takes place. Now to understand what Christmas in 1835 was like, we need some background. And by the way, you have a part in this sermon. Whenever you hear your cue, your line is, "1835." OK? Don't worry. You'll understand.

For at least a thousand years, and probably longer, in northern Europe, the winter solstice, which occurs tomorrow at 5:47 pm, was marked by celebrations. The harvest was over. People had time on their hands. It was a time of rest in the agricultural cycle of life.

December was the only time that fresh meat was available and if you think that was no reason to celebrate, just try eating jerky and turnips for eleven months and see how you feel. At the winter solstice, it was natural to drink too much, eat too much and have too much fun.

In the 5th century, in an effort to tame the festivities and make it more reverent, the church decided to celebrate Christmas at this time. And as you can see, it had just the opposite effect. People partied even more.

But when the Puritans landed in Massachusetts in 1630, they were bent on suppressing most festivities, especially Christmas. They sought to replace gaiety with a more orderly and ordered way of life. They managed pretty well, but centuries of traditional celebrations were difficult to turn into somber contemplation and hard work in a few short years. I mean, after eleven months of clearing stones from your field and lunching on pemmican and jerky, I can appreciate wanting to sing and dance a bit.

You've heard about the Puritan nightmare, haven't you? The thought that somewhere, someone is having fun. The Taliban have the same nightmare. And some folks in the extreme religious right. And now that I think about it, I'll have to research why religious zealots seem to be such somber folk.

Fortunately, fun is impossible to stop. But the Puritans managed to squelch most of it. For awhile. Their scheme began to fall apart around 1700 and everyone returned to their traditional cocktail parties. Many people made up for lost time. By the time of the revolution, in 1776, excessive drinking and endless rounds of parties

during Christmastide were commonplace.

By 1800, both Unitarians and Universalists were calling for the public recognition of Christmas as a holiday. They did so knowing there was no biblical authority for such a holiday, but they hoped that a religious holiday would curb the excesses of the season. They hadn't learned the lesson the church had in the 5th century. Well, hope in one hand, spit in the other.

By 1835, celebrations were out of hand. At that time, it was fashionable for men to visit the homes of their friends and neighbors on Christmas Day merely to eat sweets, washed down with whisky, brandy and mulled wine. Women bragged of how many guests they served. Men bragged of how many visits they paid. If they could stand up. Or talk.

One peculiar tradition was mumming. When you went mumming, you dressed up in the clothing of the opposite sex and visited your neighbor in disguise. Clergymen decried this practice as it led to debauchery and chambering. Chambering is a euphemism for fornication.

Perhaps you've heard, or rather experienced, those very powerful stereo systems that young people put in their automobiles nowadays? In large cities, it's hard to escape them. The sound is so powerful that you feel it as much as hear it. Well, in 1835, gangs of street toughs roamed throughout city streets with tin whistles, drums, rattles, horns, tea kettles, and other noise-making devices. 19th century boom boxes. They would parade through upper-class neighborhoods menacing anyone they met.

In 1835, Christmas was overtly commercial, especially in the bookstores. Publishers brought out special editions with fancy bindings and color engravings for sale during the holiday season. Sound familiar? I am reminded of those compilations of music in special "boxed sets" that are available just in time for the holidays. In 1835,

the holiday season was not the tranquil domestic idyll that we would like to associate with Christmas. It was not a model for a Currier & Ives etching.

Enter the Unitarians. First, let's meet Charles Follen, a Unitarian minister, a Harvard professor and the man responsible for our tradition of Christmas trees. Sort of.

Follen was a hard-headed radical fellow, a supporter of republicanism in Europe and a political reactionary who, once he took a stand, stuck to it. He arrived here at 29 years of age having been kicked out of his native Germany and then from Switzerland for political and revolutionary activities. It's understandable that he would emigrate to America. That's where all the best hotheads hung out in the 19th century.

He became friends with the Sedgewick family of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, who introduced him to his future wife. Remember the Sedgewicks. They'll be back.

Follen secured a post at Harvard and began to teach German, a novel subject for Americans. In time, he adopted Unitarianism, was ordained a minister and enjoyed the support of the Boston elite for his scholarship and ministry.

Remember, he was an activist. Now at this time in our nation's history—1835—what political and revolutionary enterprise do you suppose caught his fancy? Riiight. He began to preach and promote abolitionism. Not the more polite version called anti-slavery. He fell in with William Lloyd Garrison, an ardent abolitionist who was despised by the Boston elite, the very folks who supported Follen.

While abolition appealed to their consciences, Unitarians were split on the issue, some supporting a more gradual path to freedom for slaves. After all, fabric mills in New England were a source of income for many Unitarians, and the mills depended on a steady

supply of cheap cotton from the south.

Although the Harvard faculty and his friends implored Follen to moderate his views, of course he would not. In mid-December of the year...**1835**, Charles Follen was out of a job and Christmas seemed bleak at best.

Now into this story comes Harriet Martineau. Martineau was a well-known writer, born into an English Unitarian family, and in the year...**1835**, she was touring the United States researching life in the new country for an upcoming book. Being a Unitarian, she called on the Sedgewicks in Stockbridge and Boston. Remember the Sedgewicks? They'll be back.

Martineau met Follen in the year...**1835**. She attended an anti-slavery meeting with him in November and that's all it took for Martineau to take up the cause of abolitionism. Well, that cut her off from the upper crust and most of her supporters turned away. She was now in the same boat as Follen.

She visited Follen and his family during the holidays that year and published an account of the visit in her book, *Retrospect of Western Travel*. In the book, she paints this scene for us: Professor Follen removes the top of a pine tree and brings it into the formal parlor of his house, a room that the children normally do not use. Shutting himself in the parlor, he supports the top of the tree in a bucket of sand and places it on a table. If you know anything about 19th century domestic architecture, you'll remember that every room had a door, so it would have been simple for Follen to hide out in the living room.

He spends most of the day decorating the tree and lighting it with *seven dozen* small candles. He hangs small toys from branches as well as edible decorations. After all 84 candles are lit, the doors of the parlor are opened and the children allowed in.

Many of our present-day rituals are in that scene from the 1835 Boston holidays in the Follen household: A decorated tree in the living room, lights, presents, edible confections, the element of surprise and a focus on the children.

Follen was not the first person in America to practice the German custom of bringing an evergreen tree inside the house and decorating it. There are references to Christmas trees in letters and journals from southeastern Pennsylvania that pre-date 1835. What made Follen's tree the one that people remember is that it was immortalized in Harriet Martineau's memoir. He was in the right place at the right time. You recall she was a famous writer, whose books were read by many people. And in the year...**1835**, it didn't take all that many copies of a book to influence everyone in the young United States of America.

Martineau's book wasn't the only book that helped the evergreen tree take its place in our Christmas traditions. Nor was Martineau the only Unitarian writing about Christmas trees. Let's meet Catherine Sedgewick, of Stockbridge, Massachusetts and New York. Remember the Sedgewicks? They get around. Now the Sedgewick family traced their lineage to a Revolutionary War general who settled in Western Massachusetts and had seven children, all of whom rejected orthodox Calvinism and became passionate Unitarians.

One of them, Catherine Sedgewick, was a popular writer, and in the year...**1835**, a book of hers called *The Token* was available just in time for the holidays. One of the stories in the book concerned an upper-crust home, a German maidservant and a Christmas tree.

While the story is not memorable, what is interesting is the way Sedgewick associates authenticity with the tree, family life and feelings of love while associating artifice with the endless visitors, the small talk and the drinking. The tree itself is not an important part of the story, but where she places it and what happens around the

tree give us a clear picture of her thoughts about Christmas. What she is telling us in 1835 is that an authentic Christmas is in the home and in the heart.

But why are there always children in the picture? Both Martineau's and Sedgewick's stories involve children. What was attractive to the Unitarians about holiday activities with an accent on the children?

Two reasons, one practical, the other philosophical. The practical reason was that upper and middle-class parents were concerned that their children, especially the boys, would get caught up in the gangs of immigrants and ruffians who raised hell during the holiday season. So they set about creating a tradition that would keep their children indoors.

Remember the street toughs who marched through the cities banging pot lids and creating havoc? A favorite pastime of these 19th century punks was to get snookered, stage snowball battles in the streets and harass shoppers and the police. Clearly not the type of behavior for a child of the middle class.

A Christmas tree was an obvious diversion. To a young person in...**1835**, holiday parties, games, candy, lights and presents were much more attractive than the prospect of being jailed or passing out in the gutter.

But there was a drawback. This accent on children contributed greatly to the commercialization of Christmas. Once Mom & Dad corralled Junior and enticed him to celebrate with the family, they had to produce the goodies. I can almost hear Junior say, "Show me the money!" As a result, stores went overboard in stocking games, puzzles, books and toys for both girls and boys.

The philosophical reason that Unitarians accepted the Christmas tree can be traced to their theology. The liberal Unitarians in New England were a part of the Congregational Church in the 18th century.

By the year...**1835**, this liberal wing of the Congregational Church had split with the Orthodox side over the issue of human nature: The conservative orthodox believed that human nature is depraved and couldn't be changed by any action.

The liberals—the Unitarians—believed that people were more or less neutral when born and in charge of their own destinies. Accordingly, they put great emphasis on the proper training of children so that they would mature into credible and productive members of society.

Furthermore, they believed that a child's nature was innocent, nearly faultless, and to be admired and emulated. As Emerson wrote in *Nature*, "the best people were those who retained the spirit of infancy, even into adulthood."

The Unitarian educator Bronson Alcott took these ideas even farther, perhaps too far. He thought that adults should be more childlike, that a child was actually the more perfected being and adults were corrupted by their age. One story has it that Alcott insisted that a disobedient child spank *him* as punishment for the child's own misbehavior. With the assistance of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, he opened a school in Boston in the year...**1835** and enrolled many children of well-to-do Unitarians. When news of his radical pedagogy leaked out, he was forced to close the school.

But even if they disapproved of Alcott's radical notions, Unitarians were sympathetic to the message that children were basically good-hearted creatures who should be indulged, not restrained. And one of Alcott's converts was Charles Follen. And you know what he did in the year...**1835**.

What better time to throw off restraint than at Christmas? What better time to indulge the natural wonder and excitement in a child than at Christmas? What better time to draw your children near so that you can observe and learn from their unsullied nature?

A few years later, Margaret Fuller, a Unitarian and early feminist summed up the Unitarian theology of Christmas and child-rearing in these words for the *New York Tribune*:

Christmas would seem to be the day sacred to children, and something of this feeling shows itself among us...The evergreen tree is often reared for the children on Christmas evening, and its branches clustered with little tokens that may, at least, give them a sense that the world is rich, and that there are some in it who care to bless them. It is a charming sight to see their glittering eyes and well worth much trouble in preparing the Christmas tree.

So what can we learn from this story? One thing we learn is that traditions do not die out. They change shape and appear in other forms. The holiday excesses are still with us, and we're still conflicted about it. When we shop for holiday gifts, street gangs don't threaten our shopping sprees, because security guards keep them out of the malls. Mostly. I notice that Hamilton Place has a code of conduct posted at each entrance. Nonetheless, the gangs are still around.

Drunken hooligans are still around too, but today we call them football fans. These days, they often paint their bodies contrasting colors and you'll see them on TV. The snowball battles and attendant mayhem is legitimized through year-end bowl games and you don't have to leave home to participate.

Fireworks, honking horns and popping corks still make noise on Christmas and New Year's eve. For many of us, children are still the focus of the season, as any trip to the mall or casual perusal of advertisements will prove. It's still...**1835!**

Knowing why we keep certain traditions is important to understanding how the traditions affect us. With the wisdom of 2009, we can smile at the Puritan's attempts to stamp out fun and frolic around Christmas. At the end of the year, people had been celebrating for centuries and who did the Puritans think they were to stop that?

So why do we have holiday parties at Christmas? Wouldn't it be a lot more convenient to have a shindig in July? Well, it's the end of the year. It wasn't easy getting through it. A year takes its toll. And besides, it's always been done this way.

And we needn't feel conflicted about exuberant behavior at Christmas? I see nothing wrong with cutting loose at year's end. I think we need an opportunity to let off steam. Let's indulge ourselves during this cold season. A snootful of brandy will keep us warm.

Now please understand. I do not advocate over-indulgence. Just standard indulgence. Excessive consumption of anything has unpleasant consequences.

Changing the culture of Christmas is probably impossible. It may even go deeper than mere custom. We may be affected by seasonal changes in light and temperature in ways we don't understand. It may be that our need to celebrate is seasonal. Or genetic. Perhaps decorating our homes with greenery and lights is driven by a deep-seated desire to rekindle the warmth and growth of summer.

It seems to me that in 1835 Unitarians and others were using the religious aspects of Christmas as a veneer to make their underlying passions appear acceptable to society. But as the Puritans discovered, repressing the desire to celebrate is impossible. As human beings, we need several things. Food, shelter, companionship. I think we also have a need for celebrations.

You know, Bronson Alcott might have been onto something when he said that adults should be more childlike. If we pay attention to them, children *can* teach us to be joyous—for no other reason than merely to be joyous.

And while we're thinking about our children, let's remember to hug them once or twice a day. Not just this season. Not just today when

these words are fresh in our ears. But every day. Every day. Remember those words of Margaret Fuller: “Give them a sense that the world is rich, and that there are some in it who care to bless them.”

I have some homework for you. Beginning today and throughout the holiday season and into the new year and on beyond that, look for joy and capture some for yourself. Look for joy in your children, in your friends and family and in yourself. You won’t find it everywhere you look, but I think the more you look, the more you’ll find.

Do you know the name of my favorite theologian? Cyndi Lauper. Do you know what her biggest hit was? *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*. Well, Cyndi, Happy Holiday, and I hope you don’t mind if we paraphrase you and say, *People Just Wanna Have Fun*.

Just don’t have too much.

Please join me now in singing a spiritual that speaks to the hope for a brighter day. Number 239, “Go, Tell It on the Mountain.”

HYMN 239, Go Tell It on the Mountain

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE: We Wish You a Merry Christmas

The choir invites to join them in this postlude. I’ll bet you know it. It’s “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” The choir will sing the refrain and two verses, and when the refrain comes around the second time, please join them. The words will appear when it’s time to sing.

We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
And a Happy New Year
Good tidings we bring
To you and your kin
Good tidings for Christmas
And a Happy New Year