



*“I think He’s carrying this tolerance
thing a bit too far.”*

Beyond Tolerance

A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE

Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga

December 6, 2009

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is _____ and I am a member of the congregation. 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 224, Let Christmas Come

Let Christmas come, its story told
When days are short and winds are cold
Let Christmas come, its lovely song
When evening’s soon and nights are long.

Let Christmas come, its great star glow
On quiet city parks of snow
Let Christmas come, its table gleam
Love born again, the truth of dream.

GREETINGS

MADDIE. 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.

This afternoon at 3 pm, the Chattanooga Harp Ensemble will present a holiday concert right here in our sanctuary. Their special guest is Lisa Ferguson playing hammered dulcimer. Admission is free, and a reception follows the concert. We hope you can join us.

And this coming Saturday from 2 to 4 is the Minister’s Open House. Jeff and Kate invite you to their place for hors d’oeuvres, hot chocolate, mulled wine and the best camaraderie in Chattanooga. That’s Saturday from 2 to 4. Check the newsletter for details and a map.

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.

We are fortunate to have Lisa Dempsey and Tiffany Envid join us today and provide music for our service. They begin with a carol from Austria, “Still, Still, Still.”

PRELUDE: Still, Still, Still

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Today, I’d like to continue our experimentation with different readings to accompany the lighting of the chalice. Mary Hunter, would you please light our chalice? I have a brief passage from James Curtis. Your words are in italics.

I wish for you, all around you,
People who love easily and forgive quickly;
Whose eyes are stars when you are night;
Whose voices are trumpets when you are silence.

I wish for you, all around you,
People who are gifts in themselves,
And whose presence in your life
Is an all-year-round present.

STORY: The Excruciatingly, Scrupulously Twins

When I was a boy, right down the street from me lived a couple of twins, Dean and Donald, and they looked exactly the same: same hair, same eye color, same weight, same height. They wanted everything else in their lives to be exactly the same, too. So Donald and Dean were always fair with each other—excruciatingly, scrupulously fair.

Do you know what those words mean?

Everything simply had to be fair. If Donald got a new pencil, Dean had to have a new pencil—same length, same color, same sharpness. If Dean got a new skateboard, Donald had to have a new skateboard. “Why don’t you take turns?” asked their father. But taking turns wasn’t the same as having your own, which meant it wasn’t fair.

The twins were always careful to be fair—excruciatingly,

scrupulously fair, In the morning at breakfast time, they counted every cornflake in their bowls, to make sure they had the same number, They each measured a half cup of milk for their cereal. If Dean had three strawberries, Donald had to have three strawberries (even though Donald didn't really like strawberries), and the strawberries had to be exactly the same size. Oh, yes, they were fair.

“Why don't you share?” asked their mother. But sharing wasn't the same as having, and it certainly wasn't fair.

The twins knew about sharing. They slept in the same bedroom, and they had to share that, too—excruciatingly and scrupulously. They put a line of tape down the exact center of the bedroom, to split the room exactly in half. On one side of the room was a bed, a dresser, and a desk. On the other side of the room was a bed, a dresser, and a desk: same kind, same size, same color. Luckily, the line of tape went through the center of the door, so they could both get in and out of the room without crossing over the line, even if they did have to turn sideways and suck in their tummies to squeeze through without going over the line.

Actually, one side of the room had a window and the other didn't, and so their bedroom wasn't excruciatingly and scrupulously fair. But it was fair enough.

And no matter how hard they tried to make every single thing in their lives excruciatingly, scrupulously fair, some things could not be made fair. Donald could run faster, and Dean could do cartwheels. Donald was good at math, and Dean was good at spelling. It didn't seem to make any difference how much they exercised or how hard they studied; they weren't identically the same, and that wasn't fair.

“Life isn't fair,” said their father, but that wasn't—well, it wasn't fair! Things ought to be fair and even and equal.

Only things weren't. And neither were their parents. “Go study your

spelling.” said their mother the night before a spelling test, but she said it only to Donald.

“Why doesn't Dean have to study?” Donald asked.

“Because he already knows how to spell all the words,” his mother reminded him.

“That's not fair!” Donald said.

“You're right,” his mom agreed. “But that's the way it is, so go study. You flunked the last spelling test, remember?”

Donald remembered. That had been the test with all those “I before E” words, like sieve except there were also a couple of tricky ones that were “E before I,” like seine. Donald thought spelling was stupid, anyway. Who cared?

His mom cared. His dad cared. His teacher cared. Donald got out his spelling book and thumped it down on the table, but he didn't open it. He poked at the book with his pencil and stared gloomily at the wall. Dean sat down at the table, too, but he had a picture to color instead of homework to do.

Donald made a face at him, and Dean made a face right back, so that was fair. But it didn't make Donald feel any better. He opened his book to the right page then poked at it with his pencil. This week it was words with silent Es. It was still stupid.

“You want some help?” offered Dean.

Donald looked up in surprise. “You can help me?”

“Well, yeah. If you want.”

“But you already did your spelling homework. It won't be fair for

you to have to do spelling again.”

Dean shrugged. “That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“Well, thanks!” said Donald. “And hey, you know, two days from now we’re going to have a math test, so tomorrow I can help you.”

“Hey, yeah!” Dean said. “That’s right!”

Then he grinned. “That would be fair.”

It would be fair tomorrow, but even more important than that, Dean and Donald thought, was that it was nice right now.

So what do you think of this story? What’s the point?

Dean and Donald decided that maybe it was more important to be nice than it was to always be excruciatingly, scrupulously fair.

Thanks for listening to this story. You are free to go to your classes now.

CHILDREN’S RECESSIONAL

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: O Holy Night

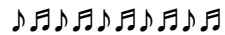
Those of you familiar with European history or who have worked in the State Department may know this fellow. Charles Maurice de Talleyrand–Périgord, 1st Sovereign Prince of Beneventum. He was a French diplomat. He died in 1838.

To say that he was a survivor is understating things a bit. He worked from the regime of Louis 16th, through the French Revolution and then under Napoleon, Louis 18th, Charles 10th, and the last King of France, Louis-Philippe. He is known simply as Talleyrand, and he is widely regarded as one of the most versatile and influential diplomats in European history.

A colleague once complained to Talleyrand about the difficulty of converting the French peasants to a more rationalist point of view. “What can I do to impress these people?” he asked. “Well,” replied Talleyrand, “you might try being crucified and rising again on the third day.”

During the French Revolution, he spent some time in exile in the United States. When he returned to *La Belle France*, he said of America, “I found there a country with 32 religions and only one sauce.”

I guess you could say he was tolerant of other opinions while remaining true to his own. Being a tolerant bunch of folks ourselves, we will now collect the morning offering for the support and ministry of this church. If you have an pledge payment, please mark it as such. 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 feeling a little tired these days. So much so that she wound up in the hospital last week. She checked out OK, but she will spend some time at NHC, a skilled nursing facility on Parkwood Avenue, near Memorial Hospital. Her daughter-in-law, Jan Antman, has been caring for her, but Jan's own mother died right before Thanksgiving, so it's been rough for her. If you can assist Jan, she would love it and I think Dottie would enjoy a visit, a card or a call.

I don't know whether I am disappointed, disillusioned or disgusted. Maybe a little of each. My experience of war is Vietnam, and I came out of that convinced that this country made several mistakes: We didn't get everyone on board before we sent soldiers overseas, thus dividing our own people; we tried to fight that war on the cheap, thus hobbling our economy; we ignored political realities in Vietnam, thus we fought a war of ideology; we discounted the defeat of another western force in Vietnam, we didn't use every tool at our disposal,

we dismissed a rising nationalistic fervor and we let our smartest people escape service, thus fighting the war with less-than-stellar troops.

I am disappointed that our military leaders seem to be making the same mistakes today in Afghanistan. They have told me nothing to make me think they learned the lessons of Vietnam. I am disillusioned with President Obama, because I thought he might find a way to keep us secure without committing more soldiers to battle. He really didn't tell me why he thought our national security was imperiled by medieval thugs and desperados hiding in caves in Afghanistan.

And I am disgusted with the whole mess. Today I pray that our generals and admirals are not blinded by their own hubris so that our national objectives can easily be achieved. I pray that their officers are not so blind that they ignore reality in order to achieve those objectives. And I pray that our service men and women return soon and be given the help they need to decompress and come to grips with their experiences of war.

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

READING: Tolerating Tolerance

I bring a reading today that is rather unusual. Unusual in that it contains pictures and unusual in that you will be able to read it right along with the reader. Since Calvin and Hobbes got such a good response two weeks ago, I thought to bring them back for their take on tolerance. The words might be less than clear, so I'll read along with you.

In the first panel, as they walk through the snow, Hobbes asks Calvin, "How are you doing on your New Year's Resolutions?" Calvin reveals that he didn't make any.

In the next panel, Calvin explains, "See in order to improve oneself, one must have some idea of what's 'good.' That implies certain values."

Then Calvin gets on his soapbox. "But as we all know, values are relative. Every system of belief is equally valid. And we need to tolerate diversity. Virtue isn't 'better' than vice. It's just different."

Hobbes, as usual, considers the implications. He says, "I don't know

if I can tolerate that much tolerance." Calvin, as usual, tries to justify his adolescent mischief, "I refuse to be victimized by notions of virtuous behavior."

SERMON: Beyond Tolerance

A few weeks ago, Sandy Kurtz gave me a magazine article to read. It was taken from *Free Inquiry*, the publication of the Council for Secular Humanism. She didn't agree with the writer, who held that tolerance was not a useful concept anymore. She thought that tolerance was a virtue and especially characteristic of Unitarian Universalists. She wanted my take on the article.

So I thank her for the reference; my sermon this morning is my answer.

Just to be sure that everyone is on the same page, a little history and background first. This story is about our Unitarian ancestors. I'll talk about our Universalist ancestors at another time. A "small u" unitarian is someone who denies the doctrine of the Trinity. A unitarian rejects the idea of three divine beings in one. For that matter, Jews and Muslims are unitarians.

According to the Catholic Church, Unitarianism is a heresy. They said so in the year 325 at the Council of Nicea. Unitarian ideas were repressed for many centuries. But at the time of the Protestant Reformation, it was among the many heretical beliefs that became popular once again.

There are three classic characteristics of Unitarians: The use of reason in religious matters, freedom of conscience and tolerance of other beliefs. Unitarians were thinkers, they reasoned things out for themselves. And they had a devil of a time getting their heads around the concept of three beings in one. It was just illogical. And if there were no Trinity, then it follows that Jesus is not God.

Perhaps you can see why this kind of thinking got people in trouble with the church. Free thinkers and other heretics were persecuted, either by the pope or by the prince. At this time, nations were becoming more important in history. And princes wanted everyone in their principalities to profess the same religion. So they killed off anyone who would not convert to the state religion.

This prompted Unitarians to develop the second characteristic, freedom of conscience. They maintained that people ought not be obliged by force to believe what the king believed. Or the pope. They maintained that people ought to be able to make up their own minds about religious matters. And from that necessarily flows the last characteristic, tolerance for what others believe. For if you maintain that you should have freedom of conscience, you can't very well deny it to someone else.

After the reformation in Europe, people tended to group themselves together in communities of common belief. John Calvin ran his brand of reformed Christianity in Geneva, and his followers were known as Calvinists. Ulrich Zwingli held sway in Zurich, Martin Luther in Germany. In time, more leaders appeared and the face of Christianity changed as often as a new idea came into practice.

In this sea of Christianity Unitarians were tiny fish, a very small minority. There was a Unitarian group in Poland centered in the town of Racov in the 16th century and later, a group—still extant—in Romania. But mostly, they were a minority and were run out of town. Being the minority, you can understand why they stood for tolerance. Because they were rarely tolerated.

Except for one, brief, shining moment. It was not Camelot, but another kingdom: Transylvania. Until the 16th century, Transylvania was Catholic. But it converted to Protestantism after 1520, when the first Lutheran books and missionaries arrived.

In 1561 John Sigismund became King of Transylvania, the first and

only Unitarian king in history. John was frail and artistic, an accomplished linguist and a superior monarch. Above all, he was deeply interested in religion, and sought to pacify the conflicts between Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians in his realm. Out of personal conviction, therefore, and practical political considerations, he fostered a policy of open discussion and broad toleration of all viewpoints which made Transylvania the freest country in Europe in religious matters.

In 1566, King John disestablished the Catholic Church in Transylvania and two years later, he issued his famous Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience. It reads,

His Majesty, our Lord, affirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them; for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.

Those words are the Edict of Torda. Although many Unitarians would claim that this is the first sovereign proclamation of religious liberty, it is not all it appears. Despite its universal language, the edict legally applied only to the four well-connected groups of the time: Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians. Other groups without political representation such as Jews, Muslims, and especially the Eastern Orthodox, were “tolerated,” but not granted legal guarantees. Moreover, the edict speaks of preachers and congregations, not of individuals. It does not guarantee the free exercise of personal religious conscience.

From eastern Europe, Unitarian theology and the notion of religious

tolerance spread westward to England and ultimately, to America. Those Puritans who settled in New England and others who settled further south were of several differing faiths. There were Baptists, Quakers, Calvinists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Jews, a lot of unchurched folk and Unitarians.

The colonies were first and foremost, a commercial enterprise, designed to remove resources from the land and ship them back to England. So in order to make money, everyone had to get along. Instituting a religious pogrom or denigrating your neighbor's religion would surely rock the boat and bring everyone down. The Revolution did not stop the money-making enterprises; it only stopped the profits from being sent to Europe. Everyone understood that tolerance was critical to the success of the new country and that is one reason why this country's Constitution made it a secular state.

So from the beginning of the United States, and Canada as well, tolerance was a notion that supported the free enterprise system and allowed everyone to succeed. It was especially important to minorities, like the Jews, the Amish, the Mennonites and the Unitarians.

So that's the background and history of religious tolerance. Now for my favorite technique in understanding something, a visit to the dictionary.

Where did the word tolerance come from? Like many words that entered English after the Battle of Hastings, from French and Latin. The Latin root, *tolerare*, means to bear, to endure. The Indo-European root of *tolerare* is a word meaning to lift, or support with derivatives referring to weights, measures and money. From that root, we also have toll, retaliate, Atlas and translate.

What does tolerance mean? The capacity for or the practice of recognizing the rights and beliefs of others; variation from a standard; the capacity to endure hardship.

Returning for a moment to the article that started this sermon, the writer posits that tolerance is passé. The writer argues that tolerance assumes that the tolerator is in some position of authority, or at least, the tolerator got there first. The writer is Stephen Gallagher, a philosopher living in North Carolina, and he says some aspects of tolerance are dubious at best and often dangerous. He writes,

Tolerance presumes a patronizing attitude on the part of the person who is tolerating the Other. The "tolerator" no doubt feels that his motives are pure, and his attitude to the Other is one of open equality. The tolerant, nonjudgmental, therapeutic "permission to be different" appears to some of the "others" as a condescending act of charity. From the perspective of the Other, being "tolerated" is not going to engender any warm feelings of inclusion or understanding. At its worst, the tolerator is doing the Other *a favor*.

Tolerance is, by definition, one-sided. The tolerator graciously decides to tolerate the Other. The Other has no say in the matter, nor does the Other have the power to return the favor. Tolerance is thus a more or less naked deployment of power.

Perhaps most dangerously, tolerance is revocable at will. The tolerator, possessing all power in the exchange, can choose at any time to stop tolerating the Other. The Other, the weaker party in the exchange, has no recourse. The pogrom and the lynch mob, continue to wait in the shadows of tolerance. The tolerant neighbor who smiles and nods at you one day could be coming at you and your children with a machete the next. The petty bureaucrat who sells you stamps at the post office today may be dressed in paramilitary fatigues and loading you and all the other men of your village into trucks for "orderly disposal" tomorrow.

This danger is exacerbated by the fact that tolerance is, at its heart, a distinctively superior religious posture. The concept of a majority that is willing, at its own discretion, to tolerate the deviant beliefs, attitudes, and practices of a minority retains a strong element of the religious "act of mercy."

The religious nature and heritage of tolerance make it a paternalistic gesture in which the Other is not accepted as an equal partner but rather subordinated, perhaps assimilated, often persecuted; and always misunderstood. Tolerance as a secular virtue is nothing more than a palatable wrapper for the mandate that the good person must sometimes tolerate others. And sometimes not.

The words of James Gallagher. Whew. Talk about your withering attack. But I take Gallagher's point. As a matter of fact, I agree with him. So what's the alternative? If tolerance is a one-sided, arrogant and paternalistic power play, what virtue could replace it? What should we develop in its place?

Shall we blindly accept one and all to the life of society? I say no. Universal acceptance doesn't work. There are limits to what we can tolerate in civil society. Katha Pollitt in *The Nation* writes:

Militant Islam may be the beginning of the end for multi-culturalism, the live-and-let-live philosophy that asks, "Why can't we all enjoy our differences?" Well, ethnic food and world music are all very well, but fatwas and amputations and suicide bombings just don't put a smile on the day.

The words of Katha Pollitt. In our reading, Hobbes suggests that too much tolerance can lead to mayhem, and to underscore his point, take Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch film director killed in an Amsterdam street by a Muslim fanatic. It would seem that tolerance overwhelms Hobbes and maybe it died in the street along with Van Gogh.

Should we as Unitarian Universalists accept all? Can we? I don't think so. There must be another way of living together. But it must also be universal in at least one respect. If we avow freedom of belief, it follows that we must co-exist with people who believe differently. I don't see any alternative to that logical progression.

I think it's real easy to tolerate different beliefs. I mean, what's the big deal? I stand here, a Muslim there, a Baptist over here, a

Buddhist over there and an atheist over here. We all stand around tolerating each other. No problem, right?

No problem with belief. The problem comes with behavior. It's not what you *think* that upsets me, it's what you *do*.

I mean why can't all those Orthodox Jews drive a car instead of walking to temple? And why on Saturday, for God's sake? And what's with those Muslims, gotta stop work five times a day to bow down to Mecca? And the Sikhs? What's with that headgear they never take off? And don't get me started on the Quakers, with their silent meetings.

It seems to me that what people don't often tolerate very well is behavior. Especially behavior that interrupts civil life. Shooting, stabbing and slashing the throat of Theo Van Gogh. Issuing a *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie. Persecuting Russian Jews at the point of a sword. Destroying Muslims in Bosnia. Lynchings in the American South.

Before we find another word for tolerance, we must separate belief from behavior and we must agree to some standards in civil life.

We could take a lesson from the colonists, who refrained from noxious behavior in order to live together and build a future. Back in 1776, when the frontier was nearly overwhelming, it was natural to rely upon your neighbor—regardless of his religion—to help you raise a barn, or fight off bears, Redcoats and other dangers. Back in 1776, it was easier to see something that we allude to each Sunday morning in Connections. It was easier to see that we're all in this together.

I think that's hard to see today. It's hard to see because of our individuality and our single-minded focus on our own future. Rare is the person who understands our seventh principle in all its implications. The seventh principle is printed in your hymnal on

page X—that’s Roman Numeral 10—in the front, three pages before the first hymn. Also on the back of the bulletin for today. It reads, “We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

The implication is that we’re all in this together. I won’t have a future without you. More important, you won’t have one without me.

So what’s the alternative to tolerance?

I am drawn to the word *hospitality*. Instead of being tolerant, why couldn’t we be *hospitable*? All the allusions of arrogance, one-sidedness, paternalism and power are gone with hospitality. There’s an element of care in hospitality. There’s an element of providing for the Other. There’s an element of decency.

Now the etymology of hospitality is fascinating. Going back through the French and Latin again, even through the Greek, we come to the root word, which means host. And guest. More properly, it means “someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality.” I like the phrase, “*reciprocal* duties of hospitality.” It implies that interdependent web in our seventh principle. Interdependent. Host and Guest. We get our words host, guest, hotel and hostel from that root.

So we could be hospitable, acting as both host and guest. Unitarians could then be characterized as being reasonable, standing for freedom of conscience and being hospitable. So let us be more than merely tolerant, more than accepting, more than understanding. Let’s be *hospitable*. Let’s be both guest *and* host.

As host, my duty is to welcome you as my guest, to include you in my life and to make you feel comfortable. I should give you some refreshment and perhaps a quiet place to rest.

As guest, your duty is even greater. You must find a way to fit

comfortably into my life, making neither a fuss nor a ruckus about all that you are giving up to be with me. You must work to be polite, gracious and thankful. We both must work to make the other be a good host and a good guest.

Now that’s something to think about: To act toward others as both a host and a guest. What would that look like?

Please join me now in singing Jeff Briere’s favorite Christmas carol, “The Hills Are Bare at Bethlehem,” Number 232 in your hymnals.

HYMN 232, The Hills Are Bare at Bethlehem

The hills are bare at Bethlehem
no future for the world they show;
yet here new life begins to grow
from earth’s old dust, a greenwood stem.

The stars are cold at Bethlehem
no warmth for those beneath the sky;
yet here the radiant angels fly
and joy burns new, a fiery gem.

The heart is tired at Bethlehem
no human dream unbroken stands;
yet here God comes to mortal hands
and hope, renewed, cries out, “Amen.”

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

Mary Hunter, would you extinguish our chalice, please?

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.

BENEDICTION

Our benediction this morning comes from Conrad Dippel and gives every one of us a reason to celebrate Christmas.

Let us enter into this Christmas with the strength of imagination. Let us not stumble on words or be caught up by images that do not represent us. Let us transcend them all with the strength of imagination so that the essence, the meaning, and the truth are ours to use.

And then let us use them, with continual imagination, to discover fruitful ways to improve the life around us. Let us stand beneath that special starlight of Christmas, find our neighbors in its special glow, and then warm our hands against the brightness of winter–night air with the special warmth that is found between people who care.

POSTLUDE: We Three Kings