

Thought for Contemplation: “I wish for the dull a little understanding and for the understanding a little poetry. I wish a heart for the rich and a little bread for the poor. ...And I wish we might all be a little kinder to each other.” -Frank Schulman

Worship Service
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, December 23, 2018

INGATHERING CHIMES
WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS
CHALICE LIGHTING

Let this chalice be for us
the light of hope
the warmth of love
And the courage of action.
Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP. -Percival Chubb

“Welcome, rich season of bounty and good cheer! Wreath every life with garlands of innocent mirth. Crown with green wreaths of joy the brows of those we love; weave in red berries of health, and the bright star of hope. Welcome blest season of peace, that bring(s) a truce to strife! And may thy white wings of peace spread over the waiting earth. Link all peoples and nations in the sure bonds of community shed peace and good will, good will and peace on all...”

HYMN *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* #244

CHILDREN’S TIME Bob Moseley

Song (seated) Go Now in Peace #413

(Children are invited to go now for a brief introduction to their program.)

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION
JOYS AND SORROWS
MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: *Christmas Mail* by J. Barrie Shepherd

I count them surreptitiously-
knowing she really doesn't think it right-
announce the final total only in a whisper
to myself, you see, I too do not approve,
would not admit to anyone such gross
and empty calculation. What kind of fool
would poll his friendships, success, even
Christmas spirit, according to the total
of these pretty colored cards?
And yet, arithmetic aside, there is
a buried treasure somewhere in these crass,
commercial symbols, the trace of a reality
that calls me, year by year, to send abroad
at least a word or two seeking to bind
fond memory into future hope.

OFFERING READING: *Noel* by Ann Porter read by Lindy Hough

When snow is shaken
From the balsam trees
And they're cut down
And brought into our houses

When clustered sparks
Of many-colored fire

Appear at night
In ordinary windows

We hear and sing
The customary carols

They bring us ragged miracles
And hay and candles
And flowering weeds of poetry
That are loved all the more
Because they are so common

But there are carols
That carry phrases
Of the haunting music
Of the other world
A music wild and dangerous
As a prophet's message

Or the fresh truth of children
Who though they come to us
From our own bodies
Are altogether new
With their small limbs
And birdlike voices

They look at us
With their clear eyes
And ask the piercing questions
God alone can answer.

ANTHEM
SERMON

Only Two Days Left

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

Aborn was a member of my church, and my neighbor. In her late nineties, she still enjoyed watching the children play, keeping up with current events, and celebrating Christmas. She looked forward to her Christmas amaryllis blooming, her packages arriving from Sweden with traditional holiday treats, and the Christmas cards. She loved the Christmas cards.

One day when I stopped in to visit, she had a pile of cards on her lap, and she was in a happy place of reverie, all smiles and contentment. I sat down to join her.

“Rev. Anita,” she said, “I must confess something – something that sounds silly and foolish. I count my Christmas cards. I count them every year. I know I shouldn’t. It seems silly, and a little crass even. But I count them, and count them, and don’t really feel ready to settle down and stop, until they reach one hundred.”

“Is that wrong? I know that quantity is not the proper measure of value or importance, but somehow, it seems to matter to me...that there are many, one hundred even.”

I chuckled. I too have known the temptation to count my Christmas cards. In fact, I felt relieved and comforted myself to learn that a woman I admired and respected, close to one hundred years old, also felt the pull, the attraction of quantifying something that clearly cannot be quantified.

We talked about why it was that counting them seemed so compelling. And what was so important to her, about achieving that threshold number of one hundred.

The pastor and poet J. Barrie Shepherd who also knows the allure of counting Christmas cards offers her answer:

And yet, arithmetic aside, there is
a buried treasure somewhere in these crass,
commercial symbols, the trace of a reality
that calls me, year by year, to send abroad
at least a word or two seeking to bind
fond memory into future hope.¹

Aborn sat with me and thought long and hard about why it mattered to her. It mattered to her to know that despite her increasing limitations at 97, people still cared about her. Despite the fact that she did not go out as often, did not encounter people so regularly in the regular ways to which she'd been accustomed, at church, in the supermarket, taking walks in the neighborhood, playing Bridge, she had not been forgotten. Those relationships she'd forged were real. Indeed, what she realized that she enjoyed the most, was the reverie of recalling those friends and distant relatives, remembering times they'd shared and how they had been together; that remembering, feeling close to people and times now far away, brought her a deep and abiding pleasure. And there was a comfort too, in her knowing that

¹ J. Barrie Shepherd, *Christmas Mail*

they also were remembering, as they wrote her name on the card, addressed and stamped the envelope, licked and sealed it firmly closed.

I could understand all of that. I could reassure her there was nothing really wrong or crass about it. It was natural to want to experience those feelings of connection, and was in fact an illustration of her wisdom, that she had learned a way to evoke those desired and comforting feelings for herself.

I know that one of the reasons why I stubbornly insist on sending Christmas cards in this digital age, is because the very physical and actual process of sitting down, selecting a card, and writing their name, evokes the emotions that bind me to the recipient, and strengthens my connections. Just as I make pictures of you in my mind when I am writing my sermons to you, I make pictures in my mind of the people to whom I am sending cards, and hold them, there, in my mind's eye, in my heart, in the very light of love. It is not only a tradition, it is a spiritual practice...an exercise of the heart.

"Count away, Aborn," I said. "If it does all that for you. Count all you want."

And she did, every year until she died at the age of 104, deeply connected to the community and the web of relationships that had held and sustained her.

I cannot think of a better way to prepare for Christmas, than to engage in the work of strengthening connections, reinforcing the ties that bind and sustain us, infusing intentionality into those relationships that bring us meaning and even joy, restoring relationships that have

faded over time, reconciling broken relationships that still have meaning, and for which the loss has been profound. After all, the call to prepare for Christmas, has always been the call to prepare for the coming of the Prince of Peace. And who might that be?

The poet understands the prophet's message, which is of course the message of love, of peace with justice, of human compassion as:

the fresh truth of children
Who though they come to us
From our own bodies
Are altogether new
With their small limbs
And birdlike voices²

There it is, the Prince of Peace, born, and born again, in each generation, in each who speak truth in their simple presence, about what matters, and for what we must care.

They look at us
With their clear eyes
And ask the piercing questions
God alone can answer.³

It matters not in what God we believe or don't believe. They look at us, nonetheless. They look with the clear eyes of the very young, that discern a future that is possible, and ask if we will let it come to pass. Will we sweep away the debris and detritus to which we have

² Ann Porter, *Noel*

³ Op cit

clung, the ways we live that cannot be sustained, the tribalisms we embrace that set one group against another, the anxiety we allow to govern our decisions, the rivalry that poses false scarcity, proposing that if you have more, it means I have less, and the rancor all of the engenders? Can we sweep that away? Can we set a clean table?

We have two days until Christmas. Not a lot of time to prepare. But unlike shopping, and cooking and baking we do have the time, even now, to seriously engage in the kind of preparation we have been considering.

First strengthening connections. It can begin now, with a phone call or an email, a text or a Christmas card, a hug, words of appreciation, the offering of apology or forgiveness. Connections need constant attending and can benefit at any time...including now.

Second, the relinquishing of all those things that get in the way of an open, peaceful, healthy, loving and compassionate life. Clearing the emotional table and setting it anew, for the life we want and the people we want to be.

They look at us
With their clear eyes
And ask the piercing questions
God alone can answer.⁴

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said:
“Be the change that you wish to see in the world.”

⁴ Ibid

And when we are afraid, we can recall Eleanor Roosevelt who said:

"You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

They are both right, and they are telling us what I think we most need to hear, and to heed.

(The children)

... look at us

With their clear eyes

And ask the piercing questions

God alone can answer.⁵

Be the change you want. Be the change they need. The God that is in you can answer.

May it be so. Merry Christmas.

Amen and blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN: People Look East #226

BENEDICTION

C

*losing Music

⁵ ibid