

The Open Hand of Christmas

December 20th, 2020
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley/Sophie Leggett
North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I am so happy to see the snow!!! My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) here in Woodstock, Vermont.

Today is Sunday, December 20th and the title of this morning's reflection is The Open Hand of Christmas. I am so happy to be joined this morning by Sophie Leggett, one of Woodstock's own. Sophie graduated from Woodstock Union High School last year and is home after her first year at college...and what I challenging year. She and I have become friends over the short time that I have know her and I am so happy that she was willing to join us this morning, as we head into this holiday week.

I would like to invite her up to get us started. Sophie...

Sophie's Portion

Good morning, my name's Sophie, and I moved to Woodstock a couple of years ago and I found the wonderful community here at the UU. I tend not to be very talkative, but I do go downstairs for coffee hour and take a donut to go... and I do feel very welcome here and I miss walking down my hill every Sunday to be here. I met Leon at a school event I was helping with, a Martin Luther King Junior celebration day, and we connected right away. I spoke a bit for the Christmas Eve ceremony last year, but as you know, so much has changed since then. I had asked Leon if I could read a poem sometime for virtual service, and I ended up here in the reflection. I'm really happy to be speaking with you today. We want to talk a little about this time of year. Thank you for listening.

My family keeps our Christmas decorations in big plastic bins in the basement, and sometime after Thanksgiving we would get my dad's help hauling them upstairs to open the lids. The first thing we look for is the homemade CD titles X-mas Mix. We don't have a CD player anymore, but we use to put it in and press play, and my very favorite Christmas song starts first:

*Maybe this Christmas will mean something more
Maybe this year, love will appear
deeper than ever before*

I can remember for most recent years thinking, "Yes, THIS Christmas, this one will mean more." I don't know what I wanted it to mean, or how.

How do we make meaning out of holidays, especially in a time like this? More than ever, I think, we need those intangible things associated with this time: hope, joy, love, peace. In this cold, dark winter. My family sets up trinkets, garland, a tree, ornaments, until the house brims with red and green. We light candles and fluff pillows. It's incredibly chaotic and joyful and beautiful.

In primitive religions, ancient humans piled up stones and sticks and regarded them as holy. Greeks and Romans built statues of their beloved Gods, indigenous people often hold ceremonies around purposeful fires, and I hang ornaments my Dad made as a kid. We look for those abstracts, the peace and love, and we build bridges between these spiritual elements and our physical lives when we hang decorations and light candles. We build altars, we make our space sacred, so that we may invite in guests like peace.

My brothers and I always woke up on Christmas morning way before the sun. We weren't allowed to wake our parents up or open presents without them, but we were allowed to open stockings. We'd sit on the floor with the long socks my mom knit for us and pull out little toys, lipglosses, hats, chocolates. Each of our pets had a stocking, and they usually got a new chew toy or a treat. One of our cats is definitely on the naughty list. Once my parents wake up and make coffee we're allowed to open what's under the tree, but with rules: one present at a time, and you couldn't go get your own present from under the tree. So I would go grab one for my brother, he would grab one for my dad, and so on. I don't know if this started as just a strategy to get us to slow down, or if it was supposed to be meaningful, but I find it significant that over and over we went through the action of handing someone a gift, whether it was from us or Santa. We got the gift of giving. I tend not to remember very clearly a lot of gifts I've gotten, although I know I've gotten more than I deserve. What I remember are the traditions, the memories, the energy behind the gifts. There are a lot of gifts I would like to give people that I can't fit in a box. Hope, happiness, confidence, a fresh start. I would give my friends the knowledge that they are loved; I would give you all a feeling of community. The song goes:

*Maybe this Christmas will find us at last
In heavenly peace, grateful at least
for the love we've been shown in the past*

I don't know for sure how this Christmas will find us. One of my brothers won't be here. It'll be the first time in my life we don't go down to see my mom's extended family. For good reason, of course, but which makes my heart heavy. It's more important than ever that we go through with intention, making our spaces sacred on purpose, whatever that means to us.

I can't wrap up a feeling of hope. But I can light a candle, and I can wrap up a book I think my friend would like, and I can make cookies. I like to think we do wrap up some magic, even though we can't see it. I put a little bit of love between pieces of scotch tape. I hope I can put a feeling of community between my words. ... If I were to give Leon a gift, one that I can't put under a tree, he would be pretty hard to buy for... I think he's got an abundance of joy and love and hope and peace, from what I've seen. But we could all probably do with a little extra love now, and I would like to give Leon the love the community feels for him. I'd want him to know how much we appreciate him for all he does here. Thank you.

Sophie: As years go on and heads turn gray how fast the guests do go.
Leon: Touch hands, touch hands with those who stay
Sophie: Strong hands to weak
Leon: Old hands to young,
Both: All around the Christmas board, touch hands.

Leon's Portion

My family kept our Christmas decorations in big cardboard boxes in the basement and sometime after Thanksgiving my dad would go out and buy the Christmas tree, strap it to the top of the car and tie it down. Sometimes, we would go out and get the tree together but it never became a ritual for us.

There was always something beautifully normal about the holidays. Our decorations were never garish...and it got garish in New Jersey! One ritual that we definitely had—although it was a casual ritual—was to drive through one of the neighborhoods that was about two miles to the east of us. There was a house there that spent a fortune and an enormous amount of time EVERY YEAR to put up outdoor Christmas decoration of every conceivable kind. There was the classic Santa and his Reindeer on the front lawn. That was required. That was the centerpiece. That one was there every year. Sometimes, there was another Santa and his Reindeer in the process of landing on the roof. That was sort of the active decoration. It had action in it. It wasn't actually moving, of course, but your mind lent it that quality. And there were blow-up candy canes that were internally lit. There were inflatable snowmen and snow women and snow children that were lit with tiny floodlight from the outside. There were fake presents wrapped in red and green plastic Christmas paper. There were wreaths and garlands and angels and Magi and lights on every tree. There were lights all along the rooflines of the house, over the front door and the windows...and over the garage as well. There was a Santa popping out of a fake chimney and giant Christmas tree ornaments that were lying about just so. There were little gingerbread families on the way to a little gingerbread house. There were toy-maker elves with hammers and chisels and sanders and tiny, little brushes. There were nut-cracker soldiers in regiment lines with big smiles on their face. There were prancing does and Christmas cats and holiday gift baskets and, of course, there was a Nativity scene or two...and sometimes three. I can't even begin to imagine what the inside of the house must have looked like!

The amount of electricity that this set-up required was unimaginal to me. Each year, the whole family in tow, we would make a point of driving by and noticing—you couldn't help but notice—all of the Christmastime fabulousness. At our place, not too far away, it was very different. It was a totally different decorations scenario. For years, there was only a peace sign strewn with blue and red Christmas lights. We were SO very quiet by comparison.

Inside of our house, maybe you can imagine the scene. We would set up a tree and decorate it each year. The lights and the ornaments—the tiny, shiny apples and fabric pears, the gold and silver stars (circa 1968)... Their strings would tangle between usages, far more than you'd think. And the lights would

tangle too. We spent so much time untangling. My sister and I had our favorite Christmas ornaments. I think that hers was an angel and mine was the horse but I can't remember. I do remember our waking up early, way before our parents. I remember that we were allowed to open our stockings as early as we wanted but that we had to wait to open the gifts beneath the tree.

Our stockings were stuffed pretty tight each year. There were many things that changed...and there were many things that stayed the same, that were a groove in me. Every year, my sister and I would get an orange at the bottom of our stocking. And there would also always be a box of raisins. I can't possibly tell you why but those two gifts were so important to me. I am grateful—to Santa, of course—that I got the same thing every year. I got different things too—a G.I. Joe eraser because my dad was in the Army and he knew that I was drawn to that adventure of that kind of thing. Little boys like to be heroes...so I got a G.I. Joe eraser. I used it in school for a while but then, it was gone... I miss that thing.

The best part of opening the stocking was taking turns with my sister. I'd open something and then, she'd open something. It was a back and forth thing with us. Trading the tiny joys of Christmas. Once the parents were up, we would head over to the Christmas tree and get to the business of opening the rest of the Christmas presents! My dad would put Handel's Messiah on the stereo and suddenly, the house would fill with music. Every valley was suddenly exalted. He was into it. He would even pretend to conduct the orchestra and it always came out perfectly!

When Sophie and I were talking about doing this reflection together, I really admired the story that she told about the giving of gifts. I thought that it was very beautiful...beautiful that the understanding in her experience was that gifts would be given to others...that no one would reach for their own gift. I thought that was lovely. That practice in her family reminded me of a story...and I shared this story with her [look at her].

One time, a group of ministers gathered for a conference in western Connecticut. It was a strong group of leaders. It was a big group of headstrong people spending the weekend together. It was fun. At one point in the conference, we started doing an exercise, an activity. We were to break into small groups and discuss the meaning and the value of a range of religious rituals—the lighting of candles, the lighting of chalices, the ringing of bells, collective singing... We could talk about just about anything...even the old, weekly rite of passage called coffee hour. I was in the group that was charged to discuss the meaning and value of the ritual pouring and the ritual drinking of wine. We talked for a long while. We were of many faiths. We shared our own experiences and we listened to one another. One of us brought up the fact that this ritual sometimes occurs on the Sabbath...on the Sabbath, when the doing of work is expressly forbidden. We wondered if the act of pouring the wine constituted work and, if it did, what we were going to do about it. We reasoned that the act of pouring the wine would be considered work if one were pouring for oneself or if one were pouring because pouring was required of them. We further

reasoned that it would not be considered work if one were pouring as a kind of blessing, as a kind of gift.

This is what touched me about your story, Sophie. I love the idea that the giving of a giving is actually a gift in and of itself. I love that idea.

It's funny. In my experience of Christmas, we didn't have the same practice around opening the presents. In my house, if you saw a present with your name on it, you could open that present right up. I mean, it wouldn't have felt good—and it wouldn't have been good—if I just tore through all my presents unappreciatively or disrespectfully. I don't think my family would have gone for that...because there are values that are deeper than just the gift.

When I was ten or so, I started leaning this lesson. I want a new, 3-speed bike for Christmas. I was serious about it. I wanted a racing bike with a banana seat, chopper handlebars and an old-style gearshift on the cross bar. Perfect for hockey-stop skidding, popping wheelies and the like. I wanted that bike and I wanted it bad. I also knew that it might not be in the cards. That part was up to Santa Claus. We would have to see.

When Christmas day came, I was so excited. I could barely contain myself. I work up so early that I couldn't even open my stocking! Rrrr. I had to wait for my sister to get up. It was one of the longest hours of my whole life. Finally, she stirred and we started opening our stockings. Then, our parents got up and we sat down around the Christmas tree. I could tell that there was no bicycle beneath the tree. There was no box big enough. But I hoped that there might be a card or a note or something saying that the bicycle was coming.

We all opened our gifts and that was lovely, of course. I was trying to hide my disappointment—which was not enormous—but it was there. As the last gifts were being opened, I realized the truth...that I would not get a bicycle that year. I was sad but ok with it. I wished it had been otherwise. I wished that things were different but they weren't.

There was wrapping paper all around us. The room looked like a mess. We started cleaning up, stuffing the paper in this little trash bag that we had and my mother or my father said, "Leon, go to the next room and get another bag for all of this wrapping paper." And so I did...and they were smiling. They and Santa knew something that I didn't. I opened the door and—wouldn't you know it—there was the 3-speed racing bike with a big, red bow on it. I just exploded. I screamed out loud. I wanted to go riding right away...in my pajamas...in the middle of winter. I was thrilled.

I still struggle a little bit with that memory. If Santa had not been able to fit that bicycle in his sleigh, would I still remember that Christmas as fondly as I do? Would the story still be fun to tell? I don't know but here's what I think—me with the benefit of 45 years... I still remember a couple of things about that 3-speed racing bike with the banana seat and the handlebars that were perfect for popping wheelies...but, you know, that's all that I remember. I don't remember what color it was. I don't remember how long I had it. I don't remember what happened to it. I do remember the good gift of joyful surprise. That is what I have carried with me. The best part of that racing bike was immaterial. Joyful surprise was its perfect speed.

This is what I understand to be the open hand of Christmas...and if I were to offer you three such gifts, Sophie...and through you, to everyone we know and love...I would offer you kindness because you are clear-sighted and perceptive. You will see good things and bad but you can balance and you can release and you can choose what you will carry with you with kindness. And I would offer you a box of raisins because it's a family tradition and you don't have to peel them. And last, I would offer you joyful surprise. And I do so with the open hand of Christmas.

Leon: As years go on and heads turn gray how fast the guests do go.

Sophie: Touch hands, touch hands with those who stay –

Leon: Strong hands to weak

Sophie: Old hands to young,

Both: All around the Christmas board, touch hands.

May it be so. Every blessing and merry Christmas. Blessed be and amen.