

First Unitarian Church of Baltimore
Sermon: Unwrapping Our Gifts
December 21, 2008
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I'll never forget the first time I got to stay up with the grown-ups on Christmas Eve, after all the "children" had gone to bed. Before they trooped out, one of the men in the family always read the story of The Night Before Christmas. Then the children put out a big glass of milk and a plate of Christmas cookies. With so much work to do, Santa needed to keep up his strength. After considerable discussion they decided on just the right table for the delicacies.

Then, with all the doors to the children's rooms closed, and the entrance to the living room sealed off as well as could be, boxes of toys and games emerged from the tops of coat closets, and from well disguised hiding places in adult bedrooms.

The same thing happened every year. There was always a toy or two that needed assembly, and the men set about their task, laughing and joking. Then they stopped laughing. Some nincompoop had obviously left out a screw or a washer or an essential bolt. The women, who had been giggling and reminiscing about their childhoods, suddenly turned their attention to the projects that were beginning to spread out over the floor, enjoying the perplexities. Finally, someone brought out the directions, and eventually, after lots of good-natured jesting, the part that the nincompoop had left out appeared. Tricycles, bicycles and train sets emerged from the confusion. Then there were lots of congratulations, back-slapping and "oohs" and "ahhs" and anticipation about how delighted the lucky children would be. I remember laughing until I cried, as everyone had all that fun going through the annual ritual.

Just before we called it a night, my cousin John appeared as if on cue with a fancy package for his wife, Corinne. Corinne was the family beauty and **very** chic. She always acted surprised and thrilled, although she knew very well that inside the package was an elegant dress from "the big store in Dallas" ----- and that she would exchange it. No matter how well John researched the purchase, the dress never fit, or suited Corinne. We all knew that at some unexpected time, Corinne would appear in a *different* lovely dress, and we would tell her how pretty it was. She would wink at us, and smile, and say, "It was my Christmas present from John." It never changed.

Early on Christmas Eve, the doorbell would ring, and a florist would arrive with my father's traditional red roses for my mother – one rose for every year since their wedding on Christmas day. After their fiftieth anniversary, and when my father had retired on his savings and Social Security, he cut back to a baker's dozen. But we all knew what those 13 roses represented. And however impatient and argumentative my parents may have been with one another, when those roses arrived, all irritations melted away as they embraced to our cheers and an eggnog toast. Homemade eggnog, by the

way, with lots of eggs and cream and the egg whites folded in. And just the right amount of extra “flavoring”.

One Christmas Eve, when he was in college, my brother and cousin Talley (John and Corinne’s son and also the father of Katie, who sometimes comes here to church with me) – stole away unnoticed. Soon there was banging on the roof. Then loud poundings on the front door – there they were, brother Dwight and Cousin Talley -- both dressed in Santa costumes, shouting “Ho Ho Ho”. Talley had his guitar and played and sang for us. With about twenty people gathered around, catching up on the news and in the sheer enjoyment of being with relatives who’d traveled a long way, that small prank, and the fact that no one realized for several minutes who they were – that silly prank was transformed into a Christmas story that was recounted every year. My brother Dwight told it last year in his Christmas letter, and how Daddy, in his innocence, came looking for him to make sure that he didn’t miss the Santas riding bicycles with antlers attached to the handle bars, with guitar to boot.

The joy of Christmas was the simple joy of being together with loved ones. Oh, there was a tree, and there were presents, and lots of squeals of delight as we watched each person unwrap each gift – one by one -- on Christmas morning. Our uncle the doctor insisted that we all have a good, sensible hot breakfast before opening any presents. We children were not amused. We also had an cousin who took forty forevers to complete her morning ablutions, and we all had to wait for her, too. We loved here every day of the year except Christmas morning.

My dad always made a fresh batch of eggnog, shouted for the nutmeg, and we began opening our modest gifts. But the presents themselves weren’t the highlight. Each gift was unwrapped individually, the recipient gave the giver a hug or a kiss, and it took hours. The highlight was the tradition, and all the rituals, and the hugs of thanks after every gift.

The dinner menu was predictable -- turkey, cornbread dressing loaded with onions and celery, spices and just a dash of finely chopped jalapeno pepper to surprise. Sweet potatoes, mashed up and laced with lots of butter, flavored with orange juice and zest, and topped with marshmallows, sizzled at the very last moment. Biscuits or homemade rolls, and a concoction of Le Seur peas in mushroom soup. My grown children and their kids *expect* or *serve* this menu.

We had Jello salad, a red version, with fruit cocktail or canned sweet cherries and pecans, served on lettuce leaves -- iceberg lettuce leaves -- on a big platter. I didn’t learn the significance of serving Jello on festive occasions till many years later. You couldn’t serve Jello unless you had a refrigerator. To serve Jello indicated economic (and therefore social) status. Jello told the world you could afford a refrigerator.

There were – and still are, other holiday traditions in my family. Several focus on food. Last week I proudly called my daughter to let her know I’d mailed a box to her – Parcel Post, uninsured. I’ve been mailing packages with the U.S. Postal Service all my life. They’ve never lost any package I’ve sent, and sometimes I get a little defensive on

behalf of the Postal Service, which delivers to cities, towns and isolated rural areas, and is the target for so much verbal abuse – undeserved, I think. We pay less to mail letters and packages than in any other developed country. I’ve lived in parts of the world where you couldn’t count on letters being delivered, and packages needed to be wrapped in muslin, stitched up, and sealed with red sealing wax, to discourage tampering. We take an awful lot for granted here in the land of plenty – the land of plenty for some.

But I want to tell you what my daughter said, when I told her the Christmas box was in the mail. Quicker than you could say, Jack Robinson, Marie said – What about the sand tarts? And what about the rum balls? All my pride that I’d sent the box off in plenty of time evaporated – instantly. They’re coming, Marie, they’ll be there. And what about the pound cake? That’s coming too, Marie. “Good, she said, you know I’m counting on it. You know how we love’m.” “Don’t worry, I’ve bought most all the butter and sugar in Washington, DC, northern Virginia and Maryland.” “Thanks, Mom, it’s a tradition, you know.”

Sand tarts are little crescent-shaped cookies, patiently rolled and shaped, baked and tossed in confectioners sugar. And I can tell you without reservation that my mother’s recipe is the best in the world. As for the rum balls – ONE and a prima ballerina would throw away their careers and become reckless gluttons. And the pound cake, it’s good plain, with ice cream, with ice cream and chocolate sauce – it’s wonderful any way you cut it.

I called my son, Robert, to let him know that his family’s box was in the mail, and guess what he said! Did you send sand tarts and rum balls? And the pound cake? And it’s the same with my brother. My brother has just completed renovating a house down in Dripping Springs, Texas. So I included a couple of pink flamingoes from Baltimore for him to put in his front yard. He’ll love it. You see, his former wife was lovely and also very proper, and engaged consultants for every thing about the house. So one day Dwight had had enough professional decorators and he went out and brought home a huge pink flamingo and sluck it in their front yard in a rather swish neighborhood. She didn’t laugh. But he will when he opens my box.

There were some large men in the family. Every Christmas **one** of them opened a box and found a flesh-pink old-fashioned corset, strengthened with whale bone, that laced up the back. A gift from the previous year’s recipient.

My cousin John died seven years ago – slipped and fell on a terrazzo floor, landed on the back of his head. Corinne died this last year, still wearing make-up, size 6 clothes, and as gorgeous as ever. My dad died suddenly 30 years ago, and Mother followed him 8 years later. But I remember the way she looked at him that last Christmas when the red roses arrived. He bent down to kiss her and said, as he always did, “Remember what happened on this day in 1932, honey.” “I certainly do, you good for nothin’ rascal.”

You see, even if it lasted only for a day or a few days, we all came together in good spirits, forgiving. We set aside our grievances against one another. Unwrapping

each Christmas gift meant renewal and a fresh, loving beginning.

The first time I was away for Christmas, in October I got a nostalgic, then sad feeling. It got heavier and worse every day leading up to Christmas. I found myself feeling alone, even as I celebrated the holidays with my husband and his family. They were wonderful people. But it just didn't feel right. They didn't have any traditions! I began to sense a kind of isolation and sadness people who are truly alone experience during the holidays. I didn't feel unloved, but I did come closer to understanding what feeling unloved or lonely might be like. Not good.

Although my family were faithful Presbyterians and Baptists and went to church every Sunday, we never attended Christmas Eve services. I never experienced the kind of lovely ceremonies that we celebrate in our Unitarian Universalist tradition. Our holiday services help to fill an enormous void that I experience every year, when I remember the Christmases of my youth.

When our children were born, I set about recreating, as best I could, some of our family holiday traditions. And added some new ones.

These days, Marie always browns (and sometimes burns to a crisp) those marshmallows on top of the sweet potato casserole.

Robert lifts the turkey out of the pan and onto the platter and carves. We've dropped Jello for green salad. But they insist on the Le Seur peas with mushroom soup. We all still hang up our stockings, and we set out the milk and cookies. Marie and Robert are teaching their children to make sand tarts and pound cake.

A few years ago we began a tradition of giving alternative gifts, donations to worthy causes. The grandchildren really like it. They open an envelope and find a card that tells them that in their name you've given a goat, or some chickens to a poor family. Or a bunch of pencils for school children. Our family has adopted this tradition for giving to adults, as well.

So, enjoy unwrapping each and every gift, whether it's a pencil, a pair of socks or a gorgeous dress from Neiman Marcus...each gift is a gift of love and a renewal and enrichment of your relationship to the giver. Blessings and joy to each and every one of you, and peace in the coming years.

One of the traditions that I began for my family long, long ago -- and enjoy the most -- happens on Christmas morning, wherever we are, before the children wake up. I get out of bed, put on my robe, and tiptoe into the living room. And before you can say, Jack Robinson, something very special shakes our world. It's a special song that I play to wake everybody up. Today isn't Christmas morning and it's not 5:00 a.m., but I'm going to share it with you right now. Please join in joyously singing *Hymn 245 **Joy to the World**