

# *Ebenezer Scrooge Was Right*

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Last Sunday morning, in the discussion following the sermon, a member of the congregation made reference to the fact that every year the holiday season seems to gobble up more and more of the autumn. Some of us are old enough to remember when it was confined to the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas--a custom which still echoes in the timing of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. But increasingly, the holiday season seems to have extended to Halloween and even beyond, as merchants and advertisers attempt to position themselves to make the great winter festival the time when the entire fiscal year may be rescued. And in response, we seem programmed to begin planning for the event earlier and earlier each year. The other day, the President of the United States added his authority to Christmas as a year-long preoccupation by confessing that he does his Christmas shopping all year long, buying this and that, and stashing it away in corners and closets, and then, on the last day or two before the great day, rushing about to pick up the last few items to round out his giving.

It has become customary for most of us to deplore the crass commercialism which has caused the Christmas greens to appear in stores before the last of the autumn's leaves have been raked away. It has become customary for us to pine for the simpler Christmas of earlier days when family, not commerce was the center of the event. It has become customary for us to wax nostalgic over the spiritual values which were once regarded as the appropriate focus for the celebration and which now seem lost in the noise and confusion and cost of the contemporary observance.

I have found myself wondering why, if Christmas has become such a burden, if the great winter festival no longer feeds the soul, do we continue to put ourselves through it. Despite all our talk about unplugging the Christmas machine, we don't do it. Even those of us who are not Christian, find it impossible to ignore the event. The Jews expand Hanukkah into a major observance. African Americans attempt to establish Kwanza as their peculiar festival. Even Unitarian Universalists, who in any other season would revolt against the language and the concepts of the traditional carols, sing them lustily and resent any tampering with the words. Clearly, there is something going on here which is more important to us than we are willing to admit. The fact seems to be that we are profoundly ambivalent about this seasonal observance.

In trying to understand what this is all about, I have come across two interesting books in the past few weeks. The first is entitled UNWRAPPING CHRISTMAS, edited by Daniel Miller. In his introductory essay, Miller suggests that the qualities in Christmas which we complain about most vociferously, are the very qualities which have always been central to the season. Thus, for example, he points out that Christmas began by swallowing up

three separate and distinct Roman observances: the Dies Natalis Invicti--a festival centered on the family and on spiritual values; the Saturnalia, a carnival like occasion; and the Kalends Festival, a celebration which involved lavish feasting, and gift-giving. This syncretistic spirit which established Christmas on the basis of absorbing other festivals has continued into our own time, and finds expression in the manner in which Thanksgiving and Halloween have been drawn into the orbit of the winter celebration.

What is more, the commercialism of the season and the secular quality of the season are equally ancient. The Saturnalia was an aggressively secular celebration in which all the ordinary rules and expectations of society were overturned, in which traditional pieties were mocked and traditional virtues flouted. The Kalends Festival was dominated by conspicuous consumption. Miller quotes Libanius, a non-Christian philosopher of the fourth century, who details the extravagance with which the rich and the poor alike strove to celebrate the occasion. And as early as the fourth century, Christians were denouncing the Kalends festival for its commercialism and its lack of a concern for spiritual values. Thus, our discomfort with this ancient seasonal festival is older than Christmas itself, and elements which provoke that discomfort have not changed much over the centuries. One suspects that we complain so vociferously about the season as a means of expiating any guilt we may feel over the manner in which we indulge its imperatives.

The second book, *THE TROUBLE WITH CHRISTMAS*, by Tom Flynn, argues that Christmas as we know it and celebrate it is not an ancient holiday at all. Indeed, he argues that Christmas was invented by six prominent Victorians: Washington Irving, Charles Dickens, Clement Moore, Thomas Nast, Francis Church and Queen Victoria. While Mr. Flynn may not be giving sufficient weight to the persistence of early patterns in the contemporary observance, he is quite right to suggest that the images with which we view the season are derived from the last century, and particularly from that great Unitarian of the Victorian age, Charles Dickens. In his novels, and particularly in his masterpiece, *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*, Dickens set the iconography of the great festival for all the subsequent generations. It is from Dickens that we derive our vision of snow falling quietly over a quaint old city, transforming its gray squalor into beauty. It is from Dickens that we derive our image of carolers, wrapped in mufflers and cloaks, wearing tall hats and bonnets, standing under softly glowing street lamps, as they sing to people hurrying hither and thither with packages under their arms. It is from Dickens that we derive our dream of a family gathered together around the hearth in perfect harmony and total accord. More than anyone else, Charles Dickens created the contemporary dream which we work so hard to incarnate every year when the great Winter festival comes around.

It is Dickens, too, who built into our awareness the inconsistencies of the season. With his iconographic characters, Ebenezer Scrooge, the tight-fisted, grasping, misanthropic miser and Tiny Tim, the patient, loving, kind, poverty-stricken victim of an unjust social system, Dickens made of the Christmas season a time of redemption. The story of how a rich man was impotent to embrace life and love, and how a poor boy could love and hope despite life-threatening illness and want becomes a parable of promise and renewal when the magic of Christmas makes each of them the agent of the other's salvation. The life

affirming cripple calls the miser back to life; the money of the miser saves the crippled boy's life. Christmas is a time of redemption for these two crippled beings who, at the kairotic moment, are fortunate enough to find each other. And that becomes a central part of our iconography of the season.

But there are other characters in Dickens' CHRISTMAS CAROL, who receive much less notice in our contemporary Christmas. Among them are Scrooge's nephew, Fred, and the three men who show up early in the story attempting to solicit a contribution for the needy from an unregenerate Scrooge. If Scrooge is the symbol of the rich, and Tiny Tim is the symbol of the poor, these other characters are symbols of the middle-class. And these are the people who float through the story unchanged, unredeemed, unrepentant and untouched. Fred knows how to keep Christmas. He knows how to decorate his house, how to buy presents for those he loves, how to throw a good party and how to have a good time. The three solicitors are vaguely aware that the poor are in desperate need, and seek to provide a bit of food and drink and warmth for them at this special season of the year. They are good people who hate to see anyone suffer needlessly. They are like us.

The problem with Dickens vision, of course, is that the Tiny Tims of the world must wait patiently to be discovered by the Ebenezer Scrooges of the world. What is more, they must hope that when the Scrooges stumble across them, it will be after their miserly hearts have been opened by the visitation of the Spirit of Christmas. Scrooge has the resources to save Tiny Tim, but Tim has no claim on Scrooge except whatever obligation his own redemption has laid upon the wealthy man. In the story, Scrooge learned to keep Christmas and to keep it well, and Tiny Tim was saved, but there is no suggestion that the unjust economic system was in any way altered, or that a thousand other Tiny Tims were not languishing and dying needlessly in that gray old city.

As I have thought about this, my mind has returned to the conversation between Scrooge and the three middle-class men soliciting for the poor at Christmas time. Perhaps you remember that when he is asked for a contribution, Scrooge inquires whether the prisons and work houses and poor houses are still in operation. When he is assured that they are, though they are inadequate and desperate alternatives for the poor, Scrooge responds that his taxes support such institutions, and that is where the poor should look for relief. Shaking their heads at the hardheartedness of the old miser, the three men depart, not to reappear until the end of the story, when a redeemed Scrooge looks them up and makes a large, anonymous contribution.

It occurs to me that the appropriate response to the problems of poverty, homelessness, hunger and want is not to be found in the rather distant kindness of Nephew Fred who treats the poor with affability, nor in the philanthropy represented by the three men taking up a Christmas collection, nor in the ultimate generosity of Scrooge toward the Cratchit family. Indeed, Ebenezer Scrooge was right in the first place, when he looked to government, to the use of tax money and public resources as the appropriate response to social and economic injustice and inequity. Perhaps his vision of the nature of that response--prison and work houses--was too narrow, but his understanding that the

problems of the poor are not going to be solved by seasonal philanthropy, or by personal generosity but only by a social and political commitment was essentially correct.

And this, you see, is where the middle class is most directly involved and implicated. Nephew Fred demonstrates his humanity by inquiring about Bob Cratchit's family, and then goes home to prepare for his festive celebration of the season. The three solicitors collect a small fund for the poor, and go home to their own families, having demonstrated their humanity and acquitted their responsibility. Nowhere does Dickens suggest that these people have a greater obligation. And yet it is they who have the power to demand the kind of social change which would insist that Tiny Tim is entitled to a minimal standard of living and of care and that he need not wait until Ebenezer Scrooge stumbles across him. And it is they, together, who have the resources to make that ideal a reality.

And that is the challenge that the story forces us to confront. Earlier in this Holiday Season this year--on Thanksgiving Day, to be precise--the television networks carried brief stories about how the President of the United States and the First Lady spent some time working in a kitchen preparing meals for the homeless before they went off to Camp David for their own celebration. The camera caught an aproned Mr. Clinton busily chopping celery for stuffing. As I watched, I found myself thinking, that may be a genuine response, it may be good public relations, it certainly is good politics, but that is not his business. The President of the United States is called to lead us toward that society in which the welfare of the people is the first responsibility of government, in which homes for the homeless, food for the hungry, medical care for the ailing are a matter of right, not of charity. His job is to convince us that Ebenezer Scrooge, however generous he may be, cannot buy justice for us. Nor will our occasional philanthropy or private charity create justice. His job is to convince the Nephew Freds of the world--that is, you and me--that only as our concern is translated into programs, only as our resources are shared, in the form of taxes appropriately spent, can the dream of a more just society be achieved.

Once more, this Christmas season, beginning today, we will be hosting the homeless of Union County for two weeks at Unitarian House. It is a tradition which has been part of our Christmas season for years. It is a project which I heartily endorse--it is essential that we respond to the needs of people where we can and as we can. In this world of here and now we must not turn our backs on those who need what we can give. But it is critical to remember that housing the homeless for a few weeks each year, year after year, is not enough. You and I, my friends, are the people who determine whether the politicians will have the courage to attempt major changes in a society which has learned to tolerate homelessness, poverty and disease as a permanent state for a significant portion of our citizenry. Unless we combine our concern for the immediate need which confronts us, with a determination to attack the causes of that need, we are in danger of buying our own redemption at the expense of those in such great need.

For centuries, this great winter festival has generated ambivalence and uncertainty among us. In the midst of the cold, fallow season, we are drawn to extravagance. In the midst of a changing world, we attempt to recreate a world which never was, except in our wishes.

In a time of changing family structures, we attempt to celebrate the tradition of family. In a time of lost community, we celebrate the dream of community. In an age aching for spiritual values, we pursue the spiritual by embracing the material reality. The great winter festival is a time of contradictions and confusions when things that do not belong together are forced into confrontation and we find ourselves constantly challenged to define who we are and what we are. It will not be different this year. But as the season progresses, I would hope that each of us will have a time to think about the images the season presents to us. I will find myself thinking about Nephew Fred's party--the bright lights and the games and the food and the comradeship of that party. I will find myself thinking about the fact that Nephew Fred was strangely immune to the process of redemption which was the theme of Dickens great classic. I will find myself asking whether I, too, am standing on the sidelines, waiting for the drama of redemption to happen to someone else, waiting for Scrooge to discover Christmas, for Scrooge and Tim to find each other. I will find myself asking what is my responsibility for the pain and suffering in the world, and what am I willing to give up in order that it be lessened. For, in truth, Ebenezer Scrooge was right--each of us must give what we can to make the world brighter, but that will never be enough until we are willing to move beyond a personal commitment to a social and political commitment. Then and only then may the old dream of peace on earth and good-will to all become more than a seasonal fantasy.