

Hearts as Harsh as Desert Lands
Christmas Eve Homily
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
December 24, 2009

READING:

From “Don’t Mess With Christmas”

By Garrison Keillor

Posted on Salon.com on Tuesday, December 15, 2009

<http://www.salon.com/opinion/keillor/2009/12/15/cambridge/index.html>

Unitarians listen to the Inner Voice and so they have no creed that they all stand up and recite in unison, and that's their perfect right, but it is wrong, wrong, wrong to rewrite “Silent Night.” If you don't believe Jesus was God, OK, go write your own damn “Silent Night” and leave ours alone. This is spiritual piracy and cultural elitism and we Christians have stood for it long enough. And all those lousy holiday songs by Jewish guys that trash up the malls every year, Rudolph and the chestnuts and the rest of that dreck. Did one of our guys write “Grab your loafers, come along if you wanna, and we'll blow that shofar for Rosh Hashanah”? No, we didn't.

Christmas is a Christian holiday -- if you're not in the club, then buzz off. Celebrate Yule instead or dance around in druid robes for the solstice. Go light a big log, go wassailing and fa-la-la-ing until you fall down, eat figgy pudding until you puke, but don't mess with the Messiah.

Christmas Eve Homily 2009

Hearts as Harsh as Desert Lands

Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

Well, it's been a noisy week around Lake Minnetonka, my hometown. The Unitarian Universalist universe has been abuzz and atwitter this past week in the wake of a column called “Don't Mess with Christmas,” written by Father Garrison Keillor. The column first appeared online at Salon.com on Tuesday, December 15, and then appeared again in our own local publication, the Star-Tribune, on Sunday, December 20. On Salon.com, the subtitle of the article is, “It's a Christian holiday, dammit, and it's plain wrong to rewrite ‘Silent Night.’ Unitarians, I'm talking to you!”

It appears that this article caused a minor earthquake in our faith community. Even outside our denomination. This week, our Church Administrator, who is a member of Messiah Methodist Church, talked to me about it. Last week I spoke with Justin Schroeder, the new minister at First Universalist Church in Uptown Minneapolis, and he said people in his church have been talking about it almost non-stop. In the past week and a half, many people in this congregation wrote to me about it, or called me, or spoke with me about it at church. And, yes, even us ministers have been in a bit of a feeding frenzy about it on the Unitarian Universalist minister's online chat list.

So what gives? Why all this energy and attention on 800 words written by someone who is not a Unitarian Universalist, in the shape of a cranky and curmudgeonly diatribe, about a holiday that celebrates a theology most of us do not literally believe in?

It seems Garrison Keillor has been on a bit of a tear lately. His column on Salon.com was pretty harsh, and it seems his “humor” toward UUs on his recent “Prairie Home Companion” radio shows has gone up a few notches in nastiness. Some people suspect Garrison’s increased meanness is the result of the small stroke he had a few months ago. Somme commented about knowing friends and family members who had similar personality changes after suffering minor strokes. I’ve also heard reports from various people over the years that in their various interactions with Garrison or the show, that he clearly states he is “laughing at us, not with us.”

Whatever the cause, and no matter the level of nastiness, Garrison Keillor’s comments hit a nerve in the Unitarian Universalist universe. One truth I do know is that when people – that is, us – react this strongly, it is because the point being made either touches us in a very sensitive and conflicted place, or the point has a piece of truth in it. In this case, I suspect both things are true. First, we Unitarian Universalists are often conflicted because we are typically quite sure about what we don’t believe, but we have a difficult time articulating what we *do* believe. This place of inner conflict and denominational conflict is perhaps most easily identified in the way we re-write our hymns. For instance, in the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” we often replace the word “wretch” with the word “soul.”

And second, since a majority of Unitarian Universalists do not consider themselves Christian, we may find ourselves in a bind, and perhaps even speechless, when confronted by a phrase from Garrison Keillor like, “If you don’t believe Jesus was God, OK, go write your own damn ‘Silent Night’ and leave ours alone. This is spiritual piracy and cultural elitism and we Christians have stood for it long enough... Christmas is a Christian holiday.” We only have to look around here to see how many people are here tonight to see that this Christmas Eve celebration means something to us Unitarian Universalists...but if this is not a celebration of the birth of Jesus as the Lord and Savior of all humanity, then what on earth are we doing here now?

I’ve been listening to “A Prairie Home Companion” since the 1980s when I was in high school. I’ve seen his show in person two or three times, I own the DVD of his movie and another DVD of a live show, several tapes and CDs from his show, and I own several of his books. Because of my familiarity with his style and humor and creativity, it is difficult for me to see how Garrison Keillor feels righteous enough to condemn others for what he does on his show every week.

He slams us for rewriting the words to “Silent Night,” when he regularly rewrites songs for his show each week, even creating words to great classical pieces of music that never had lyrics in the first place.

Garrison complains that we change our words, when he and the entire English-speaking world sing “Silent Night” in English rather than in the original German lyrics. If Garrison truly resented people who change the words to his most beloved hymns, shouldn’t he sing the song in German, and be angry at the entire English-speaking world?

And if Garrison Keillor wants to enter the ring over “spiritual piracy,” then he’d better be prepared to admit that Christians originally robbed a whole bunch of stories from Roman and pagan beliefs and practices. As just one example, at least as early as 1400 years before the birth of Jesus, stone tablets from ancient Persia depict Mithra, the God of Light, being born on December 25, and that birth is attended by no less than shepherds who come in from the fields.

But really, all these are just arguments...passionate arguments, but they heighten the conflict between faith traditions, and harden our hearts against one another. Perhaps these are truthful arguments, and points like these – and more – need to be sent in letters and emails to the Star-Tribune, Salon.com, and directly to Garrison Keillor at his Prairie Home residence.

But I feel compelled to wonder about the quality of this whole debate, and how it so easily sidetracks us from more important issues in our world today. I first wonder where Garrison Keillor is hurting. When a person is as angry and bitter and cynical as he is in his recent column, it is usually not because of the thing he says he is angry about. In our own families when we fight over silly little things about who didn't do the dishes or clean their room, or when we get angry when another member of our family cuts us off in the middle of a conversation, our anger is not really about a dish that is not washed – rather, the anger is usually an emotion that bursts out from a place of being hurt. We feel hurt, isolated and alone when we feel people do not respect our time, or value what we have to say, or when feel minimized and insignificant. So I wonder where Garrison is hurting.

But just because hurt turns to anger doesn't mean it is OK to be nasty, it just helps us understand it a little more. It is also important to be aware of what someone else's anger does to us. I notice in several conversations among Unitarian Universalists a tone of open hostility toward Garrison Keillor, and even between and among us if and when we disagree on Garrison's meaning and intent. I have mentioned a few different times in my sermons here the saying, "Be careful who you choose as your enemies, for you will become like them." Regarding this conversation, one minister on the UU minister's chat list wrote, "Jesus calls me to love my enemy. Perhaps this is the star to guide me toward the next Epiphany."

The one line in Garrison Keillor's column that gives rise to a deep sadness in me is his statement that, "Christmas is a Christian holiday – if you're not in the club, then buzz off." A line like this can only come from a person who has a hardened heart. My understanding of the teachings of Jesus, and the reason for the celebration of his birth, is to spread a new gospel of inclusion and radical love. In contrast, to name this radical gospel as a "member-only" club is, in my mind, to miss the meaning of Christmas in particular, and Christianity in general.

Tom Schade, another UU minister in Worcester, Massachusetts, wrote about this recently. He said, "Christians used to maintain that the birth of the Savior was an event that had at least the potential of saving all of humanity...Most of us will preach and enact a meaning of the birth of Jesus this season...a winter festival that reminds us that what we hope for will come from the most unexpected places (a poor baby), in sudden and seemingly miraculous reversals (like light in the darkest hour, kings worshipping in stables, virgin births), and be incarnated in acts of generosity, kindness, hospitality and rootedness. We are telling the same story, but stripped of all the elements by which Christianity has traditionally claimed earthly power by holding the keys to the Kingdom. We [Unitarian Universalists] tell of a salvation that spreads from hand to hand like the candlelight in a darkened sanctuary on Christmas Eve."

This, to me, is one of the core meanings of Christmas, and why we Unitarian Universalists come in droves to Christmas Eve celebrations. It is our Universalist message of radical hope in the face of hopelessness, of radical inclusion in the face of divisiveness and exclusion, and our message of radical love in the midst of a preponderance of hate. Each year, Christmas helps to remind us of our core Universalist message, even if we may not be always able to articulate it on a daily basis to our friends and our families.

You know, we Unitarian Universalists actually did not write new words to the song "Silent Night." Since our UU theology does not declare that Jesus is the Lord or the only Savior

of humanity, all we did was take the last phrase of the first verse, “Sleep in heavenly peace,” and use it as the last phrase for the second and third verses. In my view, this restructuring of the song allows it to speak to our UU theology, as well as maintains the original spirit of the song. Unlike conservative and tribalized portions of Christianity that lock themselves in the trap of literalism, our liberal theology has the capacity for nuance, for shading, for a deeper and more authentic appreciation for and understanding of metaphor, and of the entire scope of human emotion, thought, belief and behavior.

In contrast to Garrison’s literalism, Peter Mayer has the gracious and fluent capacity for articulating beautiful and powerful metaphors. In his song, “Stables,” a song we will hear in a few moments, Peter Mayer writes in his first two verses,

In Bethlehem a manger waits
 Long ago and so today
 Where hatred-weary people pray
 Love will come and lay there

And so do countless stables stand
 In hearts as harsh as desert lands
 Rough shelters in the wind and sand
 That love may come and stay there

So Garrison, even though you speak from a heart that is as harsh as a desert land, are we going to “buzz off” from our celebration of Christmas? No, I don’t think so. First of all, even though if you were in charge of the Christian world you would not allow us in, we *are* still part of the more generous and more loving Christianity – the one full of grace and hospitality that Jesus taught – than the one you claim. And secondly, though we also are not perfect, we will still strive to spread our Universalist understanding of the Christian message: the inherent message of hope, grace, and love for all people. Even for you, Garrison.

And that’s the news from Lake Minnetonka, where all the women sing like angels, all the men drive a Prius, and where all the children are the most beautiful reminders of peace, joy and love.

Benediction Words

These words from Theodore Parker: “Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all space; its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living.”