

Jacob Marley: Letter to a Fettered Spectre
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
Sunday, December 23, 2007

“Marley’s Ghost”

Reading from A Christmas Carol

By Charles Dickens

[The apparition] came on through the heavy door, and passed into the room before [Scrooge’s] eyes. Upon its coming in, the dying flame leaped up, as though it cried, "I know him; Marley's Ghost!" and fell again.

The same face...Marley in his pigtail, usual waistcoat, tights and boots...The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel...the spectre raised a cry, and shook its chain and wrung its shadowy hands.

"How now!" said Scrooge, caustic and cold as ever. "What do you want with me?"

"Much!" -- Marley's voice, no doubt about it...

"You are fettered," said Scrooge, trembling. "Tell me why?"

"I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?"

Scrooge trembled more and more.

"Or would you know," pursued the Ghost, "the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!"

Scrooge glanced about him on the floor, in the expectation of finding himself surrounded by some fifty or sixty fathoms of iron cable: but he could see nothing...

"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

"Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

It held up its chain at arm's length, as if that were the cause of all its unavailing grief, and flung it heavily upon the ground again.

“At this time of the rolling year,” the spectre said “I suffer most...I am here to-night to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate, Ebenezer...” [And then Marley told Scrooge about the three spirits that would visit him that night.]

When it had said these words...the apparition walked backward from him [toward the window.]

[Scrooge] became sensible of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret; wailings inexpressibly sorrowful and self-accusatory. The spectre, after listening for a moment, joined in the mournful dirge; and floated out upon the bleak, dark night. Scrooge followed to the window: desperate in his curiosity. He looked out.

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few...were linked together; none were free. Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives...The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever.

Sermon

Jacob Marley: Letter to a Fettered Spectre

Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister

To the Honorable Jacob Marley, Esquire,

Greetings to you from the 21st Century! I am fairly sure you do not know me, so allow me to introduce myself. My name is Kent Hemmen Saleska, and I am the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka, in Wayzata, Minnesota. Perhaps you've heard of us?

You may be somewhat familiar with the Unitarian faith since Charles Dickens, a writer you may know from the 19th Century, was himself a Unitarian. During your restless wandering around the world these past 150 years you may have caught wind of the merger in 1961 wherein the Unitarians merged with the Universalists to become the Unitarian Universalist Association. The Unitarians acquired their name from the belief in only one God – not a Trinitarian god-head. And the Universalists acquired their name from the belief in Universal salvation, that is, they believed that God was good, and as a good God, would never condemn anyone to an eternity in hell. In fact, some went so far as to believe that hell did not exist – or rather, that both heaven and hell could be found in the living of our own lives, right here on earth.

But I digress!

I am writing to you now because lately you have been on my mind. It is the Christmas season here where I live. Your story is often told and read in many ways each year at this time. In fact, here in the church where I serve as the minister, members of our congregation produced and performed the story once again last Sunday to great acclaim and appreciation!

I am also writing to you now in the tradition of many other ministers I've known who wrote public letters at Christmas time to great members of great holiday stories. I am a newly settled minister, and I am at the beginning of my work in this calling, so I ask your forgiveness if I am too bold in my approach to you, or if I do not understand something you may hold dear. But I do hope you appreciate my sincere desire to contact you and share some of my thoughts and feelings about you and this season.

I have known about you for many years now, ever since I was a child and saw various interpretations of your great story, from the Mr. Magoo cartoon version, to the version the Muppets made, to wonderful live theatrical productions at the Repertory Theater in Milwaukee where I grew up. In each re-telling of your story, whether as a cartoon or as a live actor, you are always presented as quite a fearsome creature. But as scary as you are, and as good as I inevitably feel after seeing or hearing your “Christmas Carol” story, I always come away feeling a little sad when I think about you.

In the story, even though Scrooge is described as “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner,” he is the one who gets all the glory in the end. Even though you and Scrooge both lived your lives fueled by greed, it is Scrooge – not you – who first gets the chance to change, and then does change. I always feel good at the end of the story because Scrooge’s hard heart, like mine can be sometimes, turns away from his grasping and covetous old ways and towards a spirit of joy, and an attitude of grace and compassion. Yet I always have this nagging feeling when the story is done that you got the short stick.

You, Marley, appear in the story as a fearsome phantom, yet your message is one of grace. Why is it that you must play the part of the messenger of Scrooge’s salvation, yet you were never given the same chance? Why is it no one ever came as a fearsome ghost to visit you before you died? What forces of the universe declared that Scrooge would have the opportunity to change his heart, while you are merely a messenger, an afterthought, a foot note to someone else’s great story? Who determined that Scrooge’s life was worth saving while yours was not?

I like to imagine that after 150 years of endlessly wandering the earth you at last found some peace. I like to imagine that after all this time since you first sprang forth from the imagination of your creator, that you too finally have your own shot at redemption. And yet, year after year you appear once again to tell your tale of woe and despair.

I wonder if, being a Unitarian and not a Universalist, Charles Dickens never heard of, or did not believe in the doctrine of universal salvation? It is hard to believe that someone who wrote such a beautiful story this one about Scrooge would, in the process, condemn another to an eternal hellish afterlife wandering the world, forever carrying the weight of every misdeed and bad decision. It’s not fair. It’s not fair, and it seems to me that it’s time some grace came your way.

In life, if you were anything like Scrooge, I can imagine that you were not a kind person. If, as the story suggests, you were as mean and miserly as Scrooge, then I can understand why you had no friends, and I can understand why you died all alone – except for Scrooge himself who only had to attend to your death for as long as it took to pay your bills. And yet, in the grand scheme of the evolution and progression of the universe, it seems to me that the price you continue to pay for your earthly transgressions is far too high.

In the spirit of didactic entertainment, I appreciate your role, and even the humor in the “Christmas Carol” story. But on a deeper theological level I am disturbed and saddened more than I can express by your horrible fate. But one thing I’ve learned about ministry so far is that the reality of a person’s feelings about their situation may be far different from what I may first expect or assume them to be. So in the middle of writing this letter to you, I went back to the story and read again the parts about you to see if I could find additional clues about your fate. In your last moments with Scrooge, this is what the story says about you and your kindred miserable spirits:

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few...were linked together; none were free. Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives...The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever.

This is as beautiful and as terrible a description of hell as I have ever read. To learn an abiding soul lesson about life only after you are dead, and then be able to do nothing about it is about as painful an existence as I can imagine. Yet when I read this passage again, I found something I missed when I read it the first time. That last line says that all of you phantoms had forever lost the power to interfere for the good in human matters. But that is a lie. Or at least that passage is not telling the entire truth. Or at the very least it is not accurate. It may be that some of you, like some of us humans, feel unable to interfere for good in human matters. But you – you are different.

You had a relationship with Scrooge. You were his business partner. You knew him as well as it is possible to know another person. Yet, you were more than a friend. You are more than just a foot-note to someone else's story. You still don't get much credit, but you are a messenger. I don't know why it took you seven years to come back and visit Scrooge – maybe he needed to work his way that much more deeply into his miserly pain before he was able to hear your message – but what you brought to Scrooge that Christmas Eve night long ago was a message of hope. "I am here tonight," you said, "to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate, Ebenezer."

This message you bring to Scrooge, by the fact that you even *appeared* to Scrooge in the first place, is proof that you can – and proof that you *did* – interfere for good in human affairs! And as I ponder this even more, I realize that not only did you interfere for the good in Scrooge's life long ago, but that you also continue to interfere for the good in our human lives each year when the "Christmas Carol" story re-told.

And so I wonder about the parts of your existence we are not told about in the story. I wonder if you had to appear to Scrooge the way you did because it was the only way you could get his attention? Maybe heavy, rattling chains were the only way he would pay attention to you?

And I wonder something else. In the story you say that as a ghost, you wear the chain you forged in life. "I made it link by link," you said. "I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it."

I understand that the chain you wear in death is one that you made unwittingly in life, and that each link represents each time during your life when you were mean or greedy or unforgiving or cruel. But it sounds like when you became a ghost after you died, you realized how mean and greedy and unforgiving you were while you were alive. And so I can't help but wonder – since you created the chain of your own free will while you were alive – if you now wear the chain of your own free will in death. I wonder if the weight you carry is forced upon you by some other entity, or if you now carry it as you carry the weight of your conscience, and now you somehow wish to atone for all your cruelty?

Please forgive me if I am prying too much into your personal affairs. But the more I think about these things, the more questions come to my mind. You do not need to answer these questions, but frankly, I feel compelled to ask them!

The more I think about it, the more I begin to suspect that the work you do as a ghost is more meaningful for you now than any work ever was to you in your former life. You wander the earth to visit the deluded and the powerful, those who are trapped and sheltered within the chains and prisons of their own fear. Your work, your calling as a ghost, is to bring a message of hope, a message about how possible it is, at any moment of our lives, to turn around and take another path.

And that, I realize, is exactly the message of Universalism. The eternal option, at any moment, to be aware of and honor grace, forgiveness and love, is the message of a loving God. It is the message of Jesus, Buddha, Allah, and the message of our own experience from the web of

relationships in which we exist as children of this Universe. I only wish we could all be so fortunate as Scrooge to have a visit from a phantom messenger such as you.

So, Jacob Marley, if you are still wandering the earth, a spectre fettered with the weight of all your sins and misdeeds, taking on many shapes and personages, bringing a message of love and hope and grace, I wonder if I may ask of you a favor. You are a frightening apparition, but you are also one of the strangest angels I could ever imagine.

So I ask – if I may be so bold and if you do not find it too impertinent – I ask if you could make midnight visits, sometime in this next year, to the leaders of our nation, and to the people who want to be leaders of our nation. I ask that you hold before them the visions of Christmases yet to come the myriad potential consequences of their actions. I ask that you help remind them, as you helped remind Scrooge, of their generous and compassionate natures.

I ask that you visit those who make war to remind them how it is possible to make peace.

I ask that you visit those who are angry to remind them how to soften.

I ask that you visit those who feel shame, to remind them about the greater power of forgiveness, even for themselves.

I ask that you visit those who are struggling with addictions so that they may be reminded that each day brings with it a new possibility.

I ask that you visit those who have experienced loss and death, so that they may be reminded about how new life grows from the compost of old life.

I ask that you visit those like Scrooge who have much, to remind them how to share what they have with those who have little.

I ask that you visit those who are certain, so they may be reminded of compassion and reverence.

I ask that you visit those who hate, so they may be reminded of love.

I ask that you visit each one of us – not once, but many times – in the dark nights when we are alone, to remind us of our human fallibility;

to remind us that our existence is the result of a chain of happy mistakes and so now we learn by making mistakes;

to remind us that the weight and the chains of our own past do not need to trap us into a single future, but that at each moment we are invited to wake to a new morning in which we may cry out, as did Scrooge at the end of his long night,

“Spirit, hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been...I will live in the Past, the Present and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me! I shall not forget the lessons they teach...Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this. I say it on my knees, old Jacob, on my knees!”