

Sermon: A Unitarian Christmas
Delivered December 19th by the Rev. Tracy Springberry

Each year the American Family Association publishes a “naughty or nice” list. Companies who use Merry Christmas in their advertisements and holiday displays are on the nice list. If staff greet customers with the innocuous “Happy Holidays,” the company makes the naughty list. AFA claims they are winning the “war on Christmas.” A war that they see as a secular attack on Christ and Christianity as the moral underpinning of our society. In the five years since they began publishing their list and asking members to boycott the naughty companies they claim they’ve seen the percentage of retailers recognizing Christmas in their advertising rise from 20 percent to 80 percent. “This is a huge win for the pro-faith community in America,” claims the AFA.

What AFA, Bill Reilly, and all people who see a religious holiday threatened by the words “Happy Holidays,” don’t seem to know is that there was already a war for the soul of Christmas, and it wasn’t the conservative religious community that won, but, the liberal religious community, specifically the Unitarians, who won.

This might surprise you. It did me. We would be the last people to fight a Christmas War it seems. For most of us “Merry Christmas” is ok and so is “Happy Holidays” or “Happy Solstice,” and if we were to write a naughty or nice list of companies this time of year we’d be judging environmental stewardship or community ethics or labor practices. But once upon a time Unitarians believed the fight for the soul of the American Christmas was the battle worth fighting.

It was Unitarians who wove together Santa Claus, Christmas trees, gift giving around the tree, focus on charity, and peace and goodwill toward all to create the Christmas that the majority of Americans celebrate today. And while the story of the baby Jesus was not left out, what was central to this holiday was not the coming of God in a human form for the atonement of human sins, as it was for conservative Christians, but Unitarian values and theology.

Aaron Wolf, the minister who wrote our reading this morning finds this reality about Christmas so disturbing that that he published an article called “A Tender, Unitarian Christmas,” a few years ago as a cry to conservative Christians to stop celebrating the Unitarian version of Christmas and get back to the real Christmas with a focus on the miracle of God becoming human in Jesus.

But how did Unitarian’s take over Christmas? Let me tell you the story.

Long ago, when the Puritans came to this country, they banned Christmas. At that time in England, Christmas was nothing like the Christmas we celebrate. It was a wild public party, much like 4th of July or Mardi Gras. People drank. They got crazy. They shot off guns and fireworks. They made a nuisance of themselves. This partying way of celebrating had an old, old history. When Roman rulers were trying to convince their people to be Christian and not pagan, they announced Christ’s birthday would be celebrated in December, the time when

Romans celebrated Saturn with over a week of wild partying. Later, as Christianity moved north, the celebration of Christ's birthday got mixed up with other winter celebrations like the Celtic Yule. These holidays also had an emphasis on a party. We still celebrate this Christmas in some ways, and the carol we began with, "Deck the Halls," an old Welsh carol, still honors that.

The Puritans understood the pagan roots of Christmas, noted that the Bible never mentioned celebrating Christ's birthday and insisted all ignore it. In 1621 when some of the colonies' newer residents tried to take Christmas day off, the governor ordered them back to work. Thirty years later the General Court of Massachusetts declared the celebration of Christmas to be a criminal offense. The Puritan's did win *that* Christmas war for a long time. For nearly 150 years, Christmas was illegal in New England. But by the 1800s, things had changed. In the southern parts of the new United States people had been celebrating Christmas with public partying and so did the new Irish immigrants who were settling in New England. Christmas was a great day for all the local bars. Additionally, by the early 1800s Puritans no longer had the moral and political authority to hold off Christmas. They were no longer a unified group and had divided into conservative and liberal factions. And the liberal Puritans, who were on the verge of becoming Unitarians, began to call for the public observance of Christmas.

Conservative and liberal Puritans divided on their beliefs about the nature of people and the nature of conversion. Conservatives believed people were naturally bad, based on the doctrine of original sin, but liberals believed people were naturally good, because all people were created by God. Conservatives believed true Christian conversion was an emotional spiritual filled moment. Liberals believed conversion happened through education, thinking, and the development of character based on following the teachings of Jesus.

Christmas, the Unitarians believed, could be a holiday to promote their values of generosity and charity and social good and would be a wonderful way to build these values, particularly in children. Unitarians at that time were obsessed with how to raise generous children with good characters. Tradition said the evil must be beaten from a child, but Unitarians did not believe it. Still how did you raise a child who was kind, generous, and good? This was brand new ground, and Unitarian parents, understandably were anxious about it. Celebrating Christmas, many felt, had the potential to help.

In the 1800s, the Unitarians were the trendsetters of their time. They were well educated, often wealthy, and had access to and control of the media. Unitarian thinkers began to write about Christmas, bringing their values and theology to the forefront of the conversation.

One of the most influential moments in this transformation of Christmas was the publishing of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* in 1823 by Clement Moore, a Unitarian. Moore invented the Santa Claus we all know and love. Before that there was no unified tradition of a Christmas visitor bringing gifts to all. "He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf," wrote Moore, "And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself! A wink of his eye and a twist of his head, soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread." He had with a single poem transformed St. Nicholas, a bishop known for acts of charity, into the myth of Santa Claus.

Aaron Wolf in “A Tender Unitarian Christmas” writes sadly, “what once was a real person who performed acts of charity as a response to the redemptive work of Christ, became an unreal, mythic figure, who inspires us to be nice to one another.” Yes, Moore transformed St. Nicholas from a Catholic bishop to a Unitarian. Moore’s Santa Claus believed in the worth and dignity of every child and that all deserved some kindness and pleasure. He reminds us of our responsibility to be kind and generous to one another. Later it was another Unitarian, Thomas Nast, a cartoonist, who placed Santa on the North Pole as message that he existed for all the children of the world.

The Unitarians also brought us the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree had become a symbol of the holiday in Germany in the 1700s. One Christmas, Charles Follen, a German immigrant, a Unitarian and the first German professor at Harvard, invited several colleagues to his home where he had put up a tree lit with candles and covered with ornaments like he remembered from his childhood. One of the guests later wrote, “It really looked beautiful. The room seemed in a blaze, and the ornaments were so well hung on, that no accident happened, except that one doll’s petticoat caught fire.” Two of his Unitarian guests wrote about the experience and in a short time, middle class Americans were celebrating Christmas by putting up Christmas trees.

Unitarians also brought us family gift giving, especially the tradition of children giving to parents. Again the tradition came from Germany. Samuel Coleridge, the Unitarian poet famous for “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” traveled to Germany one winter, and there he saw a ritual around a fir tree, where not only did the children receive gifts from their parents, but they also gave their parents gifts. He wrote:

“There were eight or nine children, and the eldest daughter and the mother wept aloud for joy and tenderness; and the tears ran down the face of the father, and he clasped his children so tight to his breast - it seemed as if he did it to stifle the sob that was rising within him. I was very much affected.”

Coleridge loved how this tradition taught children about generosity and unselfishness, and his story about it was published in “The Christian Register,” the official Unitarian magazine of the time. This was one of the great answers to the Unitarian question – how do we teach generosity? This gift exchange among parents and children became part of the Christmas tradition, not only in Unitarian homes, but also in homes across the country.

Unitarians also brought us Christmas charity. They believed our responsibility as a religious people was to follow the teachings of Christ and part of that was care for the poor. The publishing of *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, a British Unitarian brought charity to the forefront of Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* is steeped in the Unitarian theology of the spirit of Jesus and that how we treat each other matters deeply. Says the nephew of Scrooge in that story,

“I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round... as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the

grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!”

And we believe it, not just Unitarians, but most Americans. At Christmas we make sure, like Santa in *Twas a Night Before Christmas*, that all children receive gifts and that the food banks are full of food and that at least for these few weeks people everywhere are cared for because that’s what Christmas means to us.

I love all the Christmas traditions brought to us by our Unitarian ancestors. I love how they remind us to be giving, generous and kind to the people we know and the people we don’t. This for me is the spirit of Christmas.

But, just as important to our understanding of Christmas is their version of Christmas hope. In the conservative tradition the great hope of Christmas is that God became human and would die for human sin. For liberals the great hope of Christmas comes straight from the angels at Jesus’ birth “Peace on the earth, to all good will.” Human beings, those Unitarians believed, could live in peace and could be good to one another.

Earlier we sang, “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” by the Rev. Sears. That Christmas carol, Wolf acerbically notes, doesn’t even mention Jesus. No, it doesn’t, because it’s Unitarian hope. Sears wrote the carol in 1849, at end of American-Mexican war. He was also an abolitionist. He saw what evil people could do to one another. Still, Sears found in himself reason to hope, and he shared his hope in a hymn that is sung in Christian churches everywhere expressing an essential meaning of Christmas: that peace and human decency are possible.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the beloved Unitarian poet, like Sears, was deeply upset by war and human pain. The Civil War grieved him terribly. Then just a few months after the first guns were fired, he lost his beloved wife in a horrific accident. She was preserving some of their little girl’s newly cut locks in hot sealing wax, and her dress caught fire. She was burned dreadfully and died the next morning. Longfellow was devastated. Christmas, once a joyous time for the family, was simply unbearable. The first Christmas after his wife’s death, Longfellow wrote, “How inexpressibly sad are all holidays.” A year later he wrote, “ ‘A merry Christmas’ say the children, but that is no more for me.”

Then his son Charles ran away from home to join the Union Army. Just before Christmas that year, Longfellow received word that Charles had been horribly wounded. For some time his son lingered between life and death. That Christmas day, Longfellow did not write in his journal at all.

The next year, 1864, he was sitting in his study on Christmas morning when he heard the church bells ringing. Christmas was too much to bear, and he put pen to paper to compose a poem expressing his despair. But as he wrote, the bells rang on, and his strong Unitarian faith in the ultimate goodness of life was reborn. He finished his poem with the affirmation that “the wrong shall fail, the right prevail” and “that as the world revolved from day to day, a voice, a chime, a chant sublime, of peace on earth, to all goodwill.”

The Longfellow poem was set to music and has become an important Christmas carol. It is a deep expression of the Unitarian faith that there can be peace on earth and good will to all. It is an expression of hope that the majority of Americans remember this time of year as they drop money in the Salvation Army Santa buckets, contemplate the hope of a newborn child, and express gratitude for the return of the sun. When there is pain and despair, Longfellow reminds us, light and hope do return. That truth is worth celebrating whether we say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays.” It is a truth, I am thankful to our Unitarian forebears for bringing to the celebration of the winter season.