

Celebrating Giving  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2022  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

Readings: Luke 2:1-20, [Why Christmas Trees Aren't Perfect by Richard Schneider](#), Matthew 2:1-12, [The Christmas Coat](#)

Did you know that gift giving among people has been the topic of a variety of studies. “According to [a study conducted by Michael Norton and colleagues](#) at Harvard Business School, giving money to someone else lifted the spirits of participants more than spending the money on themselves, even though the participants expected higher happiness levels for spending on themselves,” <https://amourprints.com/blogs/news/the-origins-and-history-of-gift-giving>. “Stephen Post, in his book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, has shown that gifting or giving increases the health of those battling with chronic illness. Researchers suggest that giving can improve physical health because it reduces stress, which is linked to being the cause of a variety of health problems,” <https://amourprints.com/blogs/news/the-origins-and-history-of-gift-giving>. And, “A study conducted at the [National Institute of Health](#) measured brain activity among those that received and gave gifts. It turns out, in both cases the reward centers of the brain were lit up! This suggests that our brains love giving and receiving gifts,” <https://amourprints.com/blogs/news/the-origins-and-history-of-gift-giving>.

And, it is that time of year. Time to fill your pockets with Hannukah gelt for the children. Go out shopping for Hannukah or Christmas or Kwanzaa gifts. Bake cookies and give them away. Knit a sweater for a loved one. Pick a name out of an angel box or from a giving tree for an unknown name to gift. Maybe you have gone so far as to buy a toy for the dog or cat. As the National Institute of Health confirms we love both giving and receiving gifts.

The grandmother of the narrator of our last story, “The Christmas Coat” knew that and taught him that lesson. It is as fun to be Santa Claus as it is to wait for him. It turns out even the store clerk understood that and became a participant in the giving.

One final story of giving. In this story a father teaches a son to understand what Dickens wrote, that at this time of year and all times we should think of people not as below us but as fellow-passengers to the grave.

From Norman Vincent Peale, “Some of my most impressionable boyhood years were spent in Cincinnati. I still remember the huge Christmas tree in Fountain Square—the gleaming decorations, the streets ringing with the sound of carols.

“Up on East Liberty Street, where we lived, my mother always had a Christmas tree with real candles on it, magical candles which, combined with the fir tree, gave off a foresty aroma, unique and unforgettable.

“One Christmas Eve when I was 12, I was out with my minister father doing some late Christmas shopping. He had me loaded down with packages and I was tired and cross.

“I was thinking how good it would be to get home when a beggar—a bleary-eyed, unshaven, dirty old man—came up to me, touched my arm with a hand like a claw and asked for money. He was so repulsive that instinctively I recoiled.

“Softly my father said, ‘Norman, it’s Christmas Eve. You shouldn’t treat a man that way.’

“I was unrepentant. ‘Dad,’ I said, ‘he’s nothing but a bum.’

“My father stopped. ‘Maybe he hasn’t made much of himself, but he’s still a child of God.’ He then handed me a dollar—a lot of money for those days and for a preacher’s income.

“‘I want you to take this and give it to that man,’ he said. ‘Speak to him respectfully. Tell him you are giving it to him in Christ’s name.’

“‘Oh, dad,’ I protested, ‘I can’t do anything like that.’

“My father’s voice was firm. ‘Go and do as I tell you.’

“So, reluctant and resisting, I ran after the old man and said, ‘Excuse me, sir. I give you this money in the name of Christ.’

“He stared at the dollar bill, then looked at me in utter amazement. A wonderful smile came to his face, a smile so full of life and beauty that I forgot that he was dirty and unshaven. I forgot that he was ragged and old.

“With a gesture that was almost courtly, he took off his hat. Graciously he said, ‘And I thank you, young sir, in the name of Christ.’

“All my irritation, all my annoyance faded away. The street, the houses, everything around me suddenly seemed beautiful because I had been part of a miracle that I have seen many times since—the transformation that comes over people when you think of them as children of God...” of if you don’t use God language then Dicken’s fellow passengers to the grave.

We are in this life together. Giving and receiving from one another makes it joyful. As Rabbis Joseph and Nathan Segal remind us in song, “From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and from this we live.”

I end with a Christmas prayer from Unitarian Universalist minister Maureen Killoran,

“Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense  
would I have for you this season,  
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,  
the ones that are perfect,  
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

“I would (if I could)  
have for you the gift of courage,  
the strength to face the gauntlets  
only you can name,  
and the firmness in your heart to know

that you (yes, you!) can be a bearer of the quiet dignity  
that is the human glorified.

“I would (if by my intention I could make it happen)  
have for you the gift of connection,  
the sense of standing on the hinge of time,  
touching past and future  
standing with certainty that you (yes, you!)  
are the point where it all comes together.

“I would (if wishing could make it so)  
have for you the gift of community,  
a nucleus of love and challenge,  
to convince you in your soul  
that you (yes, you!) are a source of light  
in a world too long believing in the dark.

“Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense,  
would I have for you this season,  
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find,  
the ones that are perfect,  
even for those who have everything (if such there be).” Amen.