

Service
Monday, December 24, 2007
Third Unitarian Church of Chicago

Opening Words

“We entertaine him alwayes like a stranger/ And, as at first, still lodge him in the manger.” But if we celebrate a holy birth this afternoon, isn’t also true that the church ought to be like a manger?

Spoken Meditation

This is an excerpt from a poem by a Unitarian named Patrick Murfin, and he writes,

LET US BE THAT STABLE

Today, let us be that stable

Let us be the place
that welcomes at last
the weary and rejected,
the pilgrim stranger,
the coming life.

Let not the frigid winds that pierce
our inadequate walls,
or our mildewed hay,
or the...leavings of our cattle
shame us from our beckoning.

Let our outstretched arms
be a manger
so that the infant hope,
swaddled in love,
may have a place to lie.

“We entertaine him alwayes like a stranger/ And, as at first,
still lodge him in the manger.” Let us alter the notion of what it
means to be a stall for animals this evening, and despite our
imperfections and halting efforts, live the art of deep openness to
others this night, and every one afterwards.

Homily:

“We Are the Stable”

And Patrick Murfin continues,

Let a cold beacon
shine down upon us
from a solstice sky
to guide to us
the seekers who will come.

Let the lowly Shepherd
and all who abide
in the fields of their labors
lay down their crooks
and come to us.

Let the powers
of every land
...seek our rude frame.

Let herdsmen and high born
kneel together
under our roof
to lay their gifts
before Wonder.

Today, let us be that stable.

In today's *Boston Globe*, the religion writes James Carroll, reminds us of what happened in Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov." In this book, Jesus is interrogated by the Grand Inquisitor. The crime of Jesus is in the affection that so many otherwise loathsome humans have for him.

James Carroll continues, “How dare Jesus inspire such widespread trust? A relatively small number "of the great and the strong," the Inquisitor argues, can carry the burden of freedom, "while the millions, numerous as the sands of the sea, who are weak but love Thee" cannot bear freedom's weight. Only an elite minority is worthy to manage the world.”

And so the crime of Jesus was to say no to this. Dostoevsky saw this as an invitation to everyone to be capable of overcoming the limits of birth, circumstance, class, culture, and even time. That the Grand Inquisitor, an official in the movement that claims Jesus as founder, regards this invitation as an offense is Dostoevsky's way of pointing to the transcendent significance of Jesus, beyond Christian belief.

Beyond Christian belief, he said. You might or might not be Christian, but that's not the point to the writer. If you want to serve a purpose bigger than you are, the nativity story is yours: Buddhist, atheist, or otherwise.

Tonight we break bread, talk a little, sing a few songs, and then go visit the abused and lonely for a few hours in our neighborhood. No one wants to having the energy or the interest to do this for more than a few hours. And year after year, that's exactly what happens, for most of us, anyway.

But from what I've heard at Third Church, we want to be that way more of the time. Why else is our biggest service of the year every year our Austin Scholarship program in May? And why else do more and more, particularly the new members, adjust their summer plans to be here for the "Back to School" block party in August? Why else does it happen that people who don't even like Christmas that much, those of us from non-religious or non-Christian backgrounds, come here to serve a meal and wrap gifts tonight?

It's because we want to be bigger than who we are singly, and to serve needs other than are own, *even more* than twice a year. That, despite any differences in belief we have, unites us not just today, but all year round, here. Maybe you serve because you're selfishly concerned with leaving a legacy you'll be remembered by—and I plead guilty to this, too.

Whatever your reason, it's by being "manger-like," in Pat Murfin's sense of the word, to everyone we can befriend, as difficult as that can be, that brings us together this evening.

May it ever, as imperfect and halting as we are, be so.

Closing Words

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shine down upon us

from a solstice sky

to guide to us

the seekers who will come."