

“Keeping Christmas”

Christmas Day

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Let us pray—

O God, through your mighty acts we receive grace upon grace. From your fullness, feed us with your life-giving Word, that our lives, like bread, may feed a hungry world. Amen.

In Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge declares war on Christmas: “Out upon Merry Christmas! What’s Christmastime to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer ... Every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.”

I first saw *A Christmas Carol* as a child, [the 1951 black and white film version, starring Alistair Sim as Scrooge, which I still think is the best!]. I still recall sitting bolt upright when I heard Jacob Marley’s ghost moaning and thumping up the stairs with clanging chains and money boxes dragging along behind him. I loved Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim, of course, and the way the play ended, with Scrooge transformed and redeemed.

Charles Dickens, I think, was close to the mark of the Gospel with his “golden rule” moral message. The Christian Gospel, you see, is about the power of love to *change, redeem and save* and to have influence in the lives of people. A generation after Jesus’ death and resurrection, one of his followers wrote, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God ... God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” What a remarkable notion!¹

¹ John Buchanan, *Keeping Christmas*, The Christian Century, December 23, 2013

Have you ever wondered if Charles Dickens was a religious man?

He didn't like the church much. He was a Unitarian because the Anglican Church offended him because of the hypocrisy he saw in it. Many of his novels satirize priests who he felt abused their positions in the church. He wrote a book for his children called "*Life of Our Lord*" because he believed the New Testament and Sermon on the Mount were the very best guidance for how to live. In it, he tells the story of Jesus in a way young people can understand.

And so, he was very *devoutly spiritual*. But "*Christian*" would be the wrong word. In "*A Christmas Carol*," there's only one mention of Christ. Yet, Scrooge's conversion was very religious.

In Dickens' writings, he satirized *hypocrisy, poverty, avarice*. Where do you think he got his moral compass?

Well, he and his wife had nine children, and he dumped her in 1857 and took-up with his mistress. *So he was no angel*. He was a great friend and fine father in most ways. He was a rather domineering father at times. His father was a spendthrift and was thrown into debtors' prison, and Charles was chosen to work as a child in a blacking or shoe polish factory. He never went back to school and was self-taught after age 16. He never forgave his mother and father for picking him to be the one to work to pay off the debts.

He had, you might say, great expectations of his own abilities, and he was right, of course. He was given no choice but to help. He thought he'd been abandoned by his parents. It hardened him in a way that was not flattering. "*Turn the other cheek*" was not part of his Sermon on the Mount. He could be a very jovial person, but underneath he was a very troubled man.

Interestingly, the only song mentioned in "*A Christmas Carol*" was "*God Bless Ye Merry Gentlemen*," but good will toward men and women would be the main idea of his Christmas spirit. His great characters aren't always

intellectual, but they always have a huge heart. Brains are secondary. They recognize fellow travelers to the grave. All of his heroes and heroines have that quality of *empathy*, understanding that we're all in this together and we have to help each other, and that's really the only quality all his heroes have in common.²

This is important because every civilization and culture has pondered *ultimate questions*. Early philosophers concluded that if there is an ultimate being, it must be perfect, complete, and lacking nothing. Such a god would have no needs and no feelings or emotions. The Greeks called this the *apatheia* of God, from which we derive the word *apathy*. God, they insisted, must be untouched and uncontaminated by the messy neediness of humanity.

The gospel, however, proclaims *the exact opposite*: God does have feelings and is hopelessly and relentlessly in love with the world and human beings. God lives *not* in textbooks or creeds, *not* in temples, cathedrals, and churches, *but in acts of human love*.

In *Encountering God*, Diana Eck says that “*the language of faith is the language of affection ... Faith language is analogous to the language we use when we say, ‘I love you.’*”

The miracle of love is that the more you love, the more alive you are.

And it's never too late. After a harrowing, sleepless night, Scrooge becomes a changed man. He sends the biggest turkey in the neighborhood shop to the Cratchit home. He wishes his startled neighbors and shopkeepers a Merry Christmas. *He even goes to church.*

² Amanda Greene, *On 200th Birthday, There's no 'Bah Humbug' for Charles Dickens*, The Christian Century, November 28, 2012

On the book's last page, Dickens writes of Scrooge: *"His own heart laughed . . . and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well."*

Friends, *keeping Christmas* is *believing in* and *acting on* the transforming power of love.³ Wendell Berry must have had that power in mind when he wrote: *"I know that I have life / only insofar as I have love. / I have no love / except it come from Thee. / Help me, please, to carry / this candle against the wind."*

Let us pray—

Gracious God, by the gift of your Holy Spirit show us the Word made flesh—good news of great joy for all—so that we might sing with the angels: glory in the highest and peace on earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

³ John Buchanan, *Keeping Christmas*, The Christian Century, December 23, 2013