

Christmas Eve 9 PM Service 2016  
UU Church of Studio City  
Rev. Hannah Petrie

I've been reading the wise sayings, parables, and stories about Jesus. The true story of the beauty queen coat reminds me of a few of them: "What you treasure is your heart's true measure" and "if someone is determined to take your shirt, let him have your coat along with it."

On the one hand, Darcy Steinke's mother, who was not a happy woman, was giving up a part of herself, a part of her history, in giving away her beauty queen coat. On the other hand, by giving it up to someone in need, she expanded herself, and who she was in the present moment. She literally shed her old self, her old beauty queen identity, as easily as taking off a coat. In an instant, she was reborn as a generous soul, embodying Jesus.

Aren't there so many things we hold on to from the past that we think are important because they say something of who we were? But the Kingdom of God Jesus spoke of disregards the past. Jesus was only interested in people waking up to the present. He said, "The Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people don't see it . . . You won't be able to observe the coming of the kingdom of God. People won't be able to say, "Look, here it is!" or "Over there!" On the contrary, the kingdom of God is within you, and among you."

And so these are the kinds of things that make up the true gifts of the season. Gifts of life and love, that help people refocus on what religion is really about. Religion from the Latin, *religere*, to bind together. What do we bind ourselves to? What gives our lives a life-giving center, that allows us to live life more deeply? To live in a way that we can look back on and be glad we lived that way?

To live deeply takes a lot of courage, and perhaps that's why so many think of Jesus as divine, because he had super-human courage. For religious liberals, we are more likely to reflect on how this makes the figure of Jesus even more awesome – that he wasn't superhuman, and yet, he had a legendary kind of courage. People speak of courage almost casually, but real courage, moral courage, is very rare, because exercising it may very well cost you something you don't think you can afford: a promotion, a job, a relationship. Jesus' short life was a series of courageous acts that went off like fireworks, until the power of his message, of courageous compassion, became perceived as a political threat.

I've been mulling this over – was Jesus a political figure? He was more an activist of the heart. His message had political ramifications because it questioned the established structures of power and authority. He warned against elitism, and the binary thinking of "us vs. them", insisting instead on "we/all." But he never called for a political revolution and never referred to himself as the Son of God. He was mainly trying to get us to wake up to a change of heart, to a worldview on the higher plane of the Kingdom of God. He never promoted religion as politics, as religious liberals are, we must admit, prone to do.

So consider this irony: one big “gift” the recent presidential election has given to liberals is the chance to realize that there’s more to life than merely politics. We still look for love, try to be a gift to people whose values differ from ours, and try to see the gifts they offer us — whether we think we want them or not. The overwhelming reality is that almost all the people we meet are basically good, loving, care about things like fairness, fair play, and will probably stop to help someone.

The people whose candidate won are as decent as those whose candidate lost, as caring, as serious. We have let politics divide us into two nations, as though politics were all that mattered. But it’s not. We get to remember those gifts and duties that all religions try to remind us of — not just those that political and social liberals love so much. We have the chance to remember and reclaim a much larger and more whole world.

Those of you who can remember, think of the 50s and 60s, when people had about the same mix of beliefs as they do now, but it didn’t divide us! We bowled together, worshiped together, our kids played with theirs, and all the rest of it. That’s the bigger picture that has been stolen from us by divisive politics. Now we need to shake off our hangover and remember just what a marvel life is, what a wondrous array of friendships, acquaintances, activities, and so on we have been led to forget about by dividing everyone into “those who think as we do” and “those who are darn wrong.”

Those are some of the gifts lying all around us this Christmas season. But we have to unwrap them before we can enjoy them. Let’s open some of the presents all around us, and enjoy a season that we can help make sacred, if only we will.

I by no means think I’m Jesus, but, I’m trying to *be like* him this Christmas Eve, by suggesting we turn our assumptions on their head. Remember what he said, “the last shall be first” and “the promoted shall be demoted, and the demoted promoted.” Are such examples of illogic to be dismissed, or can we welcome in the cognitive dissonance long enough that some insight might appear? Like that special star they speak of on Christmas night, leading to a figure that offers salvation. Not otherworldly salvation — Jesus never promised heaven or everlasting life — such adornments were added later, in political fashion.

Originally, Jesus offered us worldly salvation, a salvation we need more than ever in our divided world — *this* salvation comes in a simple package, simply wrapped. It is merely our own hands, hearts, and voices, and what we choose to do with them — we who possess the god-given gift of free will.

Start small. Tonight and tomorrow, put those grudges aside, the petty judgments, the irritations. Love your family *and* your enemies, with wholehearted love, compassion, and forgiveness. If only for now, at Christmastime. Perhaps it will lead to something richer, something deeper, and more profound, than staying on one side of things ever could. When we are genuinely gracious and loving to someone we hate or at least really

don't like, giving really does enlarge the giver. You'll find that these become some of the most sacred moments of your life.

It led somewhere deeper for Darcy Steinke's mother, when she gave away her lovely beauty coat to the very poor woman. I love the last line of the story when she writes, "My father had told me that God resides in everything. Birds. Stars. Snow. And most particularly, I saw now, in the features of my mother's face." So as Darcy's mother shed her beauty coat to give it away, she actually became more beautiful.

So mothers, fathers, wise ones, young ones – let us, if only for tonight, believe in the God that resides within us, a God of love, generosity, openness, beauty and joy.

And now, let us embody the deep beauty of the season in our traditional candle-lit end to the service . . .

*This homily is dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr, who gave me many ideas for it herein.*