

“Less Is More”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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I love Christmas. Is life a bit frenzied during this season? Do I sometimes find myself not up to what I ever hope will be a “Silent Night, Holy Night?” Definitely. My to-do lists runneth over here and at home. Sometimes I even lose them, and then have to start from scratch. My inner grinch smiles, but you and my family do not. I take a deep breath and ask myself one of those questions posed recently in our Circle Ministry sessions focusing on “’tis the season” – specifically, whatever your memories and traditions, difficulties and delights with Christmas, what makes this season meaningful for you at this point in your life?

For those of you not familiar with Circle Ministry, a word of explanation. It’s an approach to religious community in which small groups of eight to ten meet with facilitators in member homes, generally twice a month. Its purpose? To discover deeper connections with each another, to explore life stirring questions, to grow spiritually, and to develop an intention where service to the congregation and the larger community is an outcome. Circle Ministry is a response to our yearning. So is Christmas a response to a profound yearning of the human spirit for something to happen that stirs our souls out of the ordinary, beyond expectation.

Again, I’ll pose that question: What makes this season meaningful for you at this point in your life?

[Pause]

I wonder. Trying not to presume, I simply wonder: What are the elements of meaning for each of us at Christmas time?

Many years ago, decades in fact, peppermint stick ice cream came on the market. I was ten, maybe eleven years old. My father was the original king of bargains. He smelled a discount. Quantity discounts were among his specialties. “This is really good stuff,” he remarked with the first few spoonfuls of this vanilla ice cream invaded by shards of peppermint stick. He observed our silent and smiling, “Mmms.” He took action. Within a few days, our freezer was filled with a four-gallon container of peppermint stick ice cream. It was dessert, night after night for I thankfully forget how long. After a time, peppermint stick ice cream became my nemesis as the finale of our evening meal. As I occasionally linger over the options at Wilbur’s, I speed read that singular flavor.

“More”... ceased to be something to which I aspired.

So it is with Christmas. Even though my lists run long, even though my chronic “never enough” syndrome threatens mightily at this season, “more” is loosening its hold on that to which I aspire. I long for the essence. I bask in the singular moments. I relish the sacred time with my husband, the sacred time with my daughters and their husbands and partners, the sacred time with my aging Mom, the sacred time with my longtime friends, the sacred time with you, the sacred time in conversation with perfect strangers. I linger over a late dinner by firelight. I hear the sonorous base of my long-gone Grandfather reading the words, “And in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus....” from the Gospel According to Luke. I wonder about shepherds in the fields and the songs they heard. I let go of getting the facts straight about what happened and didn’t in and around Bethlehem. I sing carols, in and out of key. I know that

Christmas isn't a happy time for everyone. I know that presence matters, the kind of presence whose opposite is absence.

I wish for what I wished for you:

“Soft snow,
A gift...wrapped in love....,

...

The joy of old stories that seem forever new and songs sung softly
under the breath of 'peace on earth.'”

Less is more. Less is more.

We speak of pregnant silences, filled space, musical rests. How to approach Christmas attentive to such gifts? In minimalist mode. Let us approach Christmas in minimalist mode, in abbreviated form.

And so I would counter my dear father's excesses, in and out of season, and offer you a few renderings of haiku, one of tanka.

Haiku, perhaps already familiar to you, is a Japanese inspired form of unrhymed verse structured by three lines, in a sequence of five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables. Tanka is cousin-like, structured by five lines in a sequence of five syllables, seven syllables, five, seven, and seven. Between each I offer a silence.

Cold and silent night
breath dancing melting ice air
breath made visible.

Oh no, he sputters
Tree lights in full rebellion.
Laughter follows free.

Red and pinched the babe.
What did you expect from him
brand new manger child?

Some so far away
Civilization's cradle
rock rock rocking now.
Once I rocked my cradle child
Peace on earth to all good will.

Bless us on this morn.
Bless us with not quite enough.
Today will suffice.

May our Christmas less be our sacred more. Amen.

Sources:

Max Coats, "A Wish," in *Celebrating Christmas: an Anthology*, Edited by Carl Seaburg, Authors Choice Press, 1983. p. 63.