

“A Dickens Christmas”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Christmas Eve

[Jesus said,] Treat others as you want them to treat you.

This is what the Law and the Prophets are all about. Matthew 7:12 [CEV]

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to do better at caring for our neighbor, caring for future generations, and caring for our world with all the communities & creatures upon, it just like you.

Amen

Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” is a theme – that for a number of years now, I have wanted to preach on for my Christmas Eve message – and the same with Dr. Seuss’ “How The Grinch Stole Christmas”.

Current events have made both timely themes for our reflection!

As America may be called a post-modern, post-literate, even post-Christian culture, it could still be said that the story of Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” is as generally known as the Bible stories about the birth of Christ.

Scrooge is a man of business – a man of the Industrial Age...

which poisoned the land and air of its own cities,

and was indifferent to its ‘surplus population’ of poor people – even enslaving its youth.

Charles Dickens wrote about these social evils of his time

with one of the most effective tools in order to do this – narrative.

Telling a story is as old as human beings gathered around the fire of a hearth to hear the news of the day, to be simply entertained...

to find empathy for others and remember.

To remember with the help of a narrative

is to remind listeners of where they came from, of who they are, and of how to proceed into the future.

That is essentially what Christmas Eve is all about.

We hear the same stories year to year,

but there is still something fresh and new to learn from them.

It is the ingredient of truth that keeps us coming back

to drink and be refreshed – your choice whether that is eggnog or spiced wine.

Now, it seems that “A Christmas Carol” makes no direct reference to the Nativity story.

We really can’t point to any one text in the Christmas cycle of stories

in Matthew or Luke or the prophetic texts of the Hebrew “Old Testament”.

However, there are at least four verses not usually associated with Christmas that I suggest are at the heart of Dickens’ “Christmas Carol”:

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The Great Commandment to love God and to love one's neighbor
as oneself from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18;
the familiar John 3:16^a with its evangelical claim,
"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son...";
Matthew 25:40, "When you have done it to the least of these
my brothers [and sisters], you have done it to me"; and
The Golden Rule from Jesus' Sermon on The Mount, Matthew 7:12,
which I would characterize as:
"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you – or else!"

Christ is not featured as a character in "A Christmas Carol",
yet there are a variety of supernatural characters more like those found
in some science fiction or fantasy adventure.

What Dickens has done is to weave them in as metaphors
into the contemporary fabric of 19th Century England's dingy cityscape –
to transform it into an imaginative and romantic vision of Christmas
that has become significant in how we think of Christmas,
even in our time...

Snowy *shoppes* along gaslit avenues, men in top hats and women in bonnets
scarved and caroling, gift-giving, feasting, candle-lit "Tannenbaum" trees,
evergreen wreaths on front doors – and did I mention, snow?

None of this is specifically mentioned in Dickens' "Carol",
but isn't that how we see it?

Horse drawn sleighs with jingly bells on snowy fields more readily come to mind
than the oases of caravans and pastoral shepherds with their flocks.

Dickens reinterpreted the Good News of the Nativity,
with the imagery of his own time and reignited the popularity of Christmas
as well as the reason for the season...

This is like Renaissance paintings of Biblical events where
Joseph & Mary and baby Jesus were portrayed in scenes of the artist's time
looking like Europeans instead of Mediterraneans
as well as any of the other figures that surrounded them.

Well, they didn't have easy access to accurate images of what the places and people
of the actual Holy Land looked like.

Instead, they put the narrative into their own context –
as a challenge to the painting's observers to put themselves into the scene.

That is what Charles Dickens did and that is what we have to do, too,
if the message of Christmas is to make sense in our own time...

Willard, p.3

Our culture loves movies and there have been some marvelous film adaptations of Dickens' "Christmas Carol" itself, along with films:

"It's A Wonderful Life", "How The Grinch Stole Christmas",
"Scrooged", and whatever your personal favorite may be.

But I encourage you to read for yourself what Charles Dickens wrote in the 1840s and how it is still speaking to our own time in the 2010s, and echoes the Gospel from 2000 years before that...

In the first chapters of "A Christmas Carol", we are introduced to the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge who runs an accounting firm in 19th Century London with his sole clerk, Bob Cratchit.

He deflects charity fundraisers, his own jolly nephew, and any other well-wishers, by saying, "Bah! Humbug!" and that he supports 'workhouses' and 'prisons' as a remedy for the 'surplus population'.

Upon his return to the spare quarters of his apartment, the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley, appears, chained with the links and padlocks forged from his earthly indifference.

Scrooge is terrified and tries to dismiss this phantom as indigestion, but Marley won't be put off and warns him that his fate is going to be the same and worse, with an even longer chain – the 'or else' of living in violation of the Golden Rule!

In the meantime, Scrooge is to be visited by three spirits to help make the point...

In the first encounter, the Spirit of Christmas Past takes Scrooge into his past where he sees himself as an eager young man with career prospects and a budding relationship with a young woman.

However,

he is lured away from his position with his genial and generous employer, Fezziwig, to be drawn into a world where numbers are more important than people and his ambition is encouraged to take priority over anything else.

The Great Law of loving God and loving one's neighbor – and even love for oneself, become diminished from Scrooge's view as he pursues his lust for power.

The second spirit materializes in the midst of Scrooge's apartment, now transformed with the bounty of all kinds of food spread before him and everywhere trimmed with evergreen.

The Spirit of Christmas Present, himself, appears like a mythical Green Man, a jolly green giant!

However, this spirit takes Scrooge on a walk to the other side of the tracks where he sees for himself the present plight of his employee, Bob Cratchit, with his wife and six children – including their youngest child Tiny Tim, crippled by poor health, whose cross to bear is a crutch.

Willard, p.4

Bob's wife is understandably critical of Scrooge,
but Bob responds, "My dear, Christmas Day"
in a spirit echoing his son Tiny Tim – who despite his infirmity,
resolutely proclaims, 'God bless us, everyone!'
Just as 'God so loved the world' that God's beloved Son was sent into it,
it is Bob Cratchit's son who plants the seed of empathy in Scrooge,
because when you know someone, it makes a difference.

The second spirit closes their time together
by disclosing two other children to Scrooge, but as a warning –
for they are something to be feared: Ignorance and Want –
the lack of education and the lack of basic needs.

The final spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, is dreadful in appearance
and the vision it brings to Scrooge is grim to match.

Scrooge is not only presented with a future where Tiny Tim died
when this might have been prevented,
but he is also shown the death of another
whose passing allows people to breathe easier!
Scrooge is still clueless that this is his fate.

He has yet to see that when we act or fail to act for the sake
of 'the least of these', the minority in our midst,
then it is like doing it to Christ
and when we do it to him, we are really doing it to ourselves...

It is when Scrooge faces his own grave and mortality, unforgiven and forgotten –
that he chooses life, he is no longer the person he was,
but has come back to his true self.

He pleads with the spectre to give him some assurance that this is only a vision
of what could be, but the spirit back disappears, with no answer...

As he finds himself back in his apartment, Scrooge has come back to himself,
joyfully resolved to live in the Past, Present, & Future!

Opening his window to find the day clear and cold,
he calls to a passing child who tells him it is Christmas morning!
He hasn't missed it and with his new found priorities,
he starts making plans to make the lives of the people around him
more joyful, too.

Charles Dickens took the Good News of the Nativity story
and put it in terms of 19th Century London's society –
which helped to renew the Christmas tradition in England and America.

Willard, p.5

That is something that Christians in every era have a responsibility to do;
Christians must continually rediscover and reinterpret
Christ and the Good News for their time and place.
This is something we can and should do as a vital congregation
of the United Church of Christ.

It so happens that our church's national leadership has set a goal
for the next few years, to proclaim and act on "the three loves of the UCC":
the world's *environment*, *children* of the next generation, and our *neighbors*.

Doesn't that match up with Dickens' message of
challenging businessmen and industrialists like Scrooge
to value people and the environment, over the bottom line;
to care for children especially those like Tiny Tim;
to have empathy for one's neighbors – or else,
like Jacob Marley warned.

Jesus may not have been mentioned directly
in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol",
but the message of the Gospel was there just the same:
Love God and love your neighbor as you should love yourself;
For God so loved the world – and all the creatures in it,
by sending God's own child to be with us;
And we should recognize that Child as being among the 'least of these' –
the minority in our midst, to care for them as if they were Christ himself
which is how any of us should hope to be treated.

So, as Tiny Tim said, 'God bless us everyone.'

Amen