

Christmas: too much intimacy?

Part 4 of a series: *Steady now. There's hope for us. There really will be something to celebrate!*

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 19, 2010: The Fourth Sunday of Advent.
Based on Matthew 1:18-25.*

One of my great elder friends was Dorothy Skillman. A long time Washingtonian who, with her husband Jack, took Jane and me, many years ago, under their loving wings and taught us a few things about being human, even though we were a clergy couple—new to town, and the youngest people in the parish.

Soon we were in awe of their wisdom about life, and soon Jack retired. Dorothy laid down the law, “Jack,” she said, “I married you for life but not for lunch.” We all watched as they settled into a very wise daily pattern in which Jack would putter around the house, mostly on his own in the morning, then go out and run errands. He would go into town for lunch with a friend, and then sneak up the back stairs for a nap. The two of them would emerge when it was time to have a drink and an evening together. That made the relationship work.

What Jack and Dorothy taught the world was that separation is at least as important as togetherness in relationships. As a pastor, a friend of yours, and a married person myself, I worry that that truth gets lost—oddly and paradoxically lost—at this time of the year. I really worry more at Christmas time than at any other time of the year about that loss.

Here's a way to think about it. Some of you are old enough to remember Joel Chandler Harris as Uncle Remus with his fables, which I think carry the truth, though they also carry now the odor of political incorrectness.

You remember Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox. Brer Fox was getting a little tired of Brer Rabbit's seeming to want to run the world and set out to teach him a lesson. He created a little figure and he mixed turpentine and tar and covered this little baby, the Tar baby—put a hat on it and put it beside the road, knowing that Brer Rabbit would demand to speak to it and have it speak to him. And of course when it didn't reply to his question, “How are you?” He said, “If I don't get a reply, I'm going to punch you.” And he did. And of course he didn't get his hand back.

And then he said, “If I don't hear from you, I'm going to butt my head against you.” And he didn't get his head back. All he got was stuck. Meanwhile, Brer Fox is falling down on the ground, laughing.

I'm afraid that what we've done to Christmas, if you're still with me, is that we've made a kind of Tar Baby out of it. We have stuck every kind of need we have emotionally and spiritually—every agenda, every guilt trip, every resentment—we've stuck onto Christmas.

The stuff and people we live with all year can become intolerable this time of the year. Because while even generosity and giving are good things, somehow we build a whole economy on anxiety—that we haven't given enough, or we haven't got enough. I don't think I'm alone in feeling a little conflicted about the patriotic calls we hear to go out on Black Friday and show Wall Street that this year will be 10% higher in retail terms than last year. Somehow, to keep Christmas means to grow the economy.

And it's not that there's anything wrong with family and friends gathering to celebrate—to break bread together, to see each other after long absences. These are beautiful things. To surprise and delight each other with gifts for the sheer love of giving— that's wonderful too.

But it's the forcing— the forcing of intimacy, the forcing of togetherness, the sticking to Christmas the obligation to be with people and have them be the people we want them to be at that moment. The people who want to honor the baby Jesus often end up dishonoring each other.

Both the legitimate desires and the fraught desires get stuck to Christmas, and we can't seem to get unstuck. But there is a different way to be together, and we can find the roots of that way in the Christmas stories themselves.

The gospels have two stories of the birth and infancy of Jesus. We heard part of one today from Matthew's gospel, and we'll hear the other from Luke's gospel on Christmas Eve.

It goes without saying that the style and the substance of these stories, when you put your thinking cap on, can strain credulity—particularly the assertion that there was a miraculous

coupling between the Holy Spirit and Mary of Nazareth that produced a child. But the thing is these stories aren't about history and certainly not about biology. They're artfully written to tell the truth about God.

Think of it. In Matthew, nobody knows that an angel is talking to Joseph but Joseph. It's the inner struggle of Joseph that is illuminating. And in Luke, the townspeople of Bethlehem don't even know that Mary and Joseph are there. They aren't in the Christmas pageant. It's some outsiders, second class citizens, shepherds, who show up. In Matthew, it's foreigners, the magi from the mysterious East who show up.

Nobody knows that an angel has talked to Mary, and there are no recorded witnesses to the birth. The stories are inner-focused. They focus on the unseen struggle that each of these people has with his or her role in what becomes a huge leap—our understanding of how the spiritual and material really do intersect in life as we know it.

Further, no one really knows about this birth for a long time. The stories aren't written down until well after the stories of the teaching of Jesus, the courageous life of Jesus, and the martyrdom of Jesus. The stories are late, the reflection comes late, as it does, I think, to all of us.

What we learn is that *nobody forces God or truth or change or expectation on anyone else*—least of all does God do any forcing. Forced togetherness at Christmas or in your growth towards spiritual maturity is not God's way.

Forced intimacy is never good. The God of the Christmas stories is the God who comes close, but not too close. If we can hear it underneath our anxieties, we're left with a new vision for life, a new understanding of what it is to be human. Early Christians put a title onto Jesus (one he never used but they did). They got it from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the prophets: "The Son of Man"—which translated is the *child of the humanity*. At Christmas, the child grows up into what a human being ought to be.

For many years, NPR has run a wonderful seasonal commentary—don't know the name of the commentator—a kind of monologue on the state of Christmas. It consists of a guy simply reading a very long list of the names of recognizable merchants. The gimmick is that each name is related to the next name, and he reads with increasing acceleration. Then he begins to slow the pace, and he ends very deliberately with the words "Lord . . . and . . . Taylor . . . Good . . . Lord, . . . what . . . have . . . we . . . done . . . to . . . Christmas?"

Well, we've stuck it with our anxieties or projections, our silly and almost childish understanding of stories that are meant to tell a really sophisticated and life-giving truth. And along the way, we've eliminated Advent.

I'm beginning to think that Advent is functioning for people who are searching for spiritual maturity the way a "time-out functions" in the hands of clever parents of young children. A time out is when the kid is overwrought. The kid is striking out. The kid just can't handle himself or herself.

A time-out is not, by the way, sitting in the corner as a punishment. It's just, *Let's sit down, let's look at something else. Let's get quiet. Let's remember who and what we are.* That's Advent.

Instead of all the rush, in all the anxiety, in all the stuck-ness that surrounds us this season, you can prepare for Christmas by learning to be yourself. Be conscious of your agendas, whatever they are. Reconcile where we can, but don't force it. Find the grown up within, the one who knows how magic this time of the year really can be. And then set a table of welcome. Learn to be one another's guests.

And remember—as we say, "Life is short and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us." So especially at this time of year, "Be swift to love. Make haste to be kind." And remember God wants you for life, and maybe not for lunch.

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