

“What a difference a babe makes”

Some of you have met my brother Brian. He is the least obviously religious member of my family. But during my journey toward ordination and now in the priesthood he has surprised me with the depth of his spirituality. Over Christmas I discovered another aspect of his of which I was no aware.

It was the third day of Christmas we were out raking leaves in my mother’s yard when a couple of neighbors came by on their afternoon constitutional. After a brief chat they said, “Happy New Year” as they walked away. We both responded “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.” A moment later Brian started to grumble, “It is not New Year’s yet, it is still Christmas. People think that just because Christmas Day is past Christmas is over.” I responded, “Right. There are twelve days of Christmas.” “He said, “Yes. Don’t they know the song?” I agreed, “And also Shakespeare’s play ‘Twelfth Night.’” Whether he realizes it or not, my brother is a budding liturgy nerd; at least as regards the church calendar.

As much as my brother and I might grumble about the culture turning Christmas into a one-day event and discarding it like so much tinsel and wrapping paper, there is little in our culture that helps us keep Christmas as a season. Really the only things that remind us are the aforementioned song and play. The culture seems to want to get Christmas over and done with. I think it is because we are exhausted by the run up. As Linus and Charlie Brown pointed out more than fifty years ago, Christmas as a religious event has been overwhelmed by the commercial extravaganza.

Whether we are dutifully celebrating Advent over and against the culture, or we have given in to the culture, the season before Christmas Day has become a revel of parties and shopping. We need the twelve days of Christmas to celebrate the first coming of Christ or as a respite from the commercialism. We need the celebration of light, joy, birth, peace, good will, and wonder. As the calendar year ends we need time for reflection and ease. We need time for setting aside the past so that we can live into the future of Christ who is newly born in our hearts. We also need to gather ourselves for what Howard Thurman called “The Work of Christmas.”

If you read my blog post on Friday, you will have read Thurman’s poem. He was not a poet per se, but a theologian, author, preacher and teacher.¹ I once read that good theology is like poetry. So I think it is apropos that a theologian should express himself poetically.

In “The Work of Christmas” Thurman tells us that there is more to Christmas than the twelve-day celebration of the birth of Christ. Once everyone has gone home—shepherds, angels, kings, and the Holy Family—once all of the celebration, swaddling clothes, inns with no vacancy signs and animal stalls are all behind us there is something more that we have to do.

¹ Thurman was one of Martin Luther King, Jr’s mentors, and made him aware of nonviolent resistance he learned about when he visited Gandhi in India.

We have to take the joy, wonder and promise of Christmastide deeply into our hearts and then out into the world. Now is the time for finding, healing, feeding, releasing, rebuilding, and peacemaking. Now as we come to the end of the Christmas season it is time to put to work what we have been given in the gift of the newborn Christ.

A gift is not really fully realized until it is accepted and put to use. If we receive a gift and store it away never to use it we have never really accepted it, even if we did send a thank you note. If we receive a gift and re-gift it we never really took it in and accepted it. Re-gifting is not sharing it is getting rid of something unwanted. With the gift of the birth of the Son of God we are called not only to accept that gift and take it into our hearts, but to have that gift make a difference in our life and in the lives of others.

I expect you have seen a baby get passed around to be admired. There is sometimes a person who holds the baby like a dirty towel rather shakily and as far from themselves as possible. Fearing something untoward will happen they are eager to pass the baby on to another. Too many of us react this way to the newborn Christ. We are called to be like the adoring and wondering ones, who eagerly take the baby in their arms, hold it close, and stare beatifically into its eyes. We are called to be like the ones who wonder at the tiny fingers and curled up toes. We are to feel like our arms were made specifically to hold a precious child. We cannot get enough of being lost in the gaze of the child.

While a birth is wonderful, there are responsibilities that go along with it. Like a new parent our lives are to be changed by Christmas. Our responsibility is to nurture the baby in our hearts. We are to take the love of Christ into the world and share it with others. We are to look out into the world and see the Christ in everyone we meet. We are to care for each other like we would care for that little babe in arms. We are to do this with our heart on fire with songs of joy.

Christmastide is ending and now the work of Christmas begins.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.²

² "The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman