

A DICKENS OF A CHRISTMAS
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luke 2: 8 – 14 (NIV)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying:

**“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on
whom his favor rests.”**

Perhaps the most quoted line of Charles Dickens is found in the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was best of times, it was the worst of times.” Throughout his life and literature Charles Dickens was caught in and inspired by the polarities and tensions in which we live. His own life was mounted on the fulcrum of hope and despair, great expectations, and hard times. Dickens teetered back and forth, engaging the tautness of life’s strain. For example, it is said that Dickens had a romantic, even sentimental, view of the family. But his views of family were shaped by his own experience as a child. His father, John Dickens, held a low paying position in the Naval Pay office. He is reported to have been a

jovial man, witty, optimistic, generous, and well liked. After his death, Elizabeth Dickens wrote of her husband, “Certainly there never was a man more unselfish, and ever a friend to those whom he could serve and a most affectionate kind husband and father.”¹

Yet John Dickens is remembered as lazy and irresponsible. He brought his family to financial ruin and was coerced into debtor’s prison. Charles was forced at the age of 12 to work at Warrens Blacking, where he prepared bottles of shoe polish for retail sale. With that his childhood was brought to an end. Charles would write vividly about England’s debtor classes and work houses. These images worked their way into *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dickens wrote of England’s children with cunning insight and compassion. Who is not touched by David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, and little Pip of *Great Expectations*?

Charles Dickens’ own children remember their father as one who became increasingly distant, as they grew older.² As Dickens rose to fame and prosperity he wanted desperately for his life and family to be ordered and happy. He loved the theatre and public readings but demanded personal privacy. Like every mortal, he lived in the reality of a

¹ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 453.

family that had its own share of suffering. His grandfather was a criminal. His marriage was shaken by affairs and rumors of affairs. Dickens' family watched husband and father sway between generous charity and angry depression. Indeed, it is Dickens' ideal of home and family that is the major theme of his numerous Christmas stories and what he so desperately yearned for in his own life.

Not until Charles Dickens did Christmas become the major holiday that it is today, both in the religious and secular senses of that word. Christmas had been a quiet holiday where gifts were given to children. By and large, families stayed home and read, rested, and enjoyed music and parlor games. Scholars agree that Charles Dickens infused Christmas with a curious blend of religious mysticism and popular superstition. The Christmas of Charles Dickens resembles the more ancient festivals that had been celebrated in rural areas of northern England. He made Christmas cozy and comfortable by exaggerating the darkness beyond the small circle of light that shone in the home.³ But I wonder how much of an exaggeration Dickens needed to create the darkness of Victorian England.

³ Ibid., pp. 413 – 414.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the 17th century, the displaced working classes understood that their families would not be able to support themselves if their children were not employed. In 1840, less than twenty percent of the children of London had any schooling. The rest of the children were working. Some were lucky to find employment as apprentices in respectable trades such as carpentry. They worked 64 hours a week in the summer and 52 hours in the winter. Many took jobs as servants and in 1850 there were over 120,000 domestic servants in London alone. These usually worked 80 hours per week at one halfpence per hour, or 40 cents a week.

Children worked sixteen hours a day under atrocious conditions in jobs that were dangerous and dirty. They worked in iron and coalmines, textile mills, gas works, shipyards and factories. Five-year-old children were found working in textile mills. The Whig government recommended in 1833 that children aged 11 – 18 be permitted to work a maximum of twelve hours a day; children 9 – 11 were allowed to work eight hours a day; and children under nine were not permitted to work at all.⁴ It would not require too much exaggeration on Dickens' part to contrast this world of cruel labor with its attendant poverty, disease,

⁴ David Cody, "Child Labor," Associate Professor of English, Hartwick College.

decay, injury, death and darkness with the hope of a warm and well-lit home. Indeed, what is Christmas if it is not the fervent human hope for light in the very bowels of winter's bleak gloom?

Recall from *A Christmas Carol* Bob Cratchit's family following their dinner of goose and pudding. "At last the dinner was all done, the cloth was cleared, the hearth swept, and the fire made up. The compound in the jug being tasted and considered perfect, apples and oranges were put upon the table, and a shovel-full of chestnuts on the fire. Then all the Cratchit family drew around the hearth, in what Bob Cratchit call a circle, meaning half a one; and at Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glass. Two tumblers and a custard cup with handle.

These held the hot stuff from the jug, however, as well as golden goblets would have done; and Bob served it out with beaming looks, while the chestnuts on the fire sputtered and cracked noisily. Then Bob proposed, "A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears, God Bless us!" Which all the family echoed.

"God bless us every one!" said Tiny Tim, the last of all.

He sat very close to his father's side upon his little stool. Bob held his withered little hand in his, as if he loved the child, and wished to keep him by his side, and dreaded that he might be taken from him."⁵

There you have the tension of Charles Dickens. In the midst of this lovely family setting poverty and the specter of death are not removed. We are swept up by the images of oranges, cider, and chestnuts. Our hearts rise up with the voice of Tiny Tim, "God bless us, every one." And we are smacked in the face with that child's withered hand bandaged in the mortal fear of a worried father.

Many people feel that Christmas is little cause for celebration because the fire is out, the kettle does not sing, and there is no family to toast God's blessing. The image of parents and children warmed by the fireplace of a snug home is often unlike anything some have ever known. As we sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful," many have lost hope for their marriage. "Silent Night, Holy Night" stands in contradiction to drunken fathers who cannot inebriate the nightmare of their anger. "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" is too great a contrast to those whose minds are wracked by depression and despair. "Gloria in Excelsis" is more praise than one dying of cancer can manage.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol – Christmas Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 46-47.

I do not know how we escape the rabid tension of hope and gloom that we all must cope with, even at Christmas. I know it is not enough to say that we could not appreciate the light but for the darkness, or the warmth has no meaning in temperate climes. Dickens never escaped it in his own life, regardless of romantic endings to many of his novels. But there are two aspects of Charles Dickens' life that should not be dismissed as mere sentimentalism. Charles Dickens believed that human beings are moral agents, regardless of their station in life. He believed that moral agency is generated and nurtured in the home where every child should be loved and sheltered.

Dickens was a Unitarian Christian, though his novels never seem to be driven by explicit Christian values. He portrayed the church as an empty institution, and clergy were parodied or attacked.⁶ Yet there is clear evidence that Dickens brought religious sensibility and social ethics deep into the heart of his works. In a letter to the Reverend D. Macrae, Dickens wrote:

“With a deep sense of my great responsibility always upon me when I exercise my art, one of my most constant and most earned endeavors has been to exhibit in all my good people some faith reflections of our great Master, and unostentatiously to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of moral goodness. All my strongest

⁶ Ackroyd, pp. 505-509.

illustrations are drawn from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit; all my good people are humble, charitable, faithful, and forgiving.”⁷

Dickens’ work exposed the disparity of wealth in Victorian England, the abuse of children, and the grinding circumstances that degraded the working classes. And more often than not those were the very characters who proved to be effective moral agents. They displayed real faith, charity, and humility. Dickens’ characters were the conduits of moral values.

He believed that the suffering human being, awash on the streets of London, was the responsibility of each and every one of us. He taught his own children this prayer:

“Make me kind to my nurses and servants and to all beggars and poor people and let me never be cruel to any dumb creature, for if I am cruel to anything, even to a poor little fly, you, who are so good will never love me...”⁸

Indeed, it is quite a surprise to Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge that he is responsible for the general welfare of his human beings. The shocking news comes to him from the ghost of his former business partner, Mr. Jacob Marley. Remember that Marley appears in chains, chains made of “cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses in steel.”

⁷ Cody, *Dickens and Religion*

⁸ Ackroyd, p. 506.

Scrooge questions why it is that spirits such as Marley's must walk the earth.

“It is required of every man,” the Ghost returned, “that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world – oh is me! – and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth and turned to happiness.” (I cannot think of a better definition of hell.)

Scrooge protests this seeming punishment and exclaims, “But you were always a good man of business, Jacob.”

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing his hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.”⁹

The business of human beings is nurtured in the family, however configured, however rich or poor. Dickens saw his audience as one large family. I suspect that he understood the birth narrative of Jesus primarily in terms of a young family seeking shelter. Mary and Joseph represent the

⁹ *A Christmas Carol*, pp. 17-20.

many working class families that Dickens wrote about, struggling against hostile elements in a world unsympathetic to their well-being. Consider the irony of the Savior of the World nestled in the arms of an adolescent unwed mother. The Wonderful – Counselor shaped by the calloused hands of a carpenter. The Prince of Peace sheltered and protected by two young people on the run, fleeing the wrath of Herod. The very future of God cradled in very human hands of flesh, with all of our uncertainties and possibilities. And yet this same child would change the shape of human history.

It is the urge of Oliver Twist to find a family. Pip revels in the love of Joe in *Great Expectations*, painfully conscious that he is “brought up by hand” by his sister. Think of the deep loyalty of Little Dorrit caring for her father in debtor’s prison. And of course, we return to *A Christmas Carol* and the Cratchit family. The deepest human values and the most profound social ethics are nurtured in human families.

We may never be able to resolve the tensions that we feel at Christmas time. Many of us will bounce from hopeful fantasy to cruel reality, from childhood images of innocence to memories of wanton adulthood. For some the Christmas magic is forever tarnished. We bear within our very own souls the best and worst of times. But I still believe

with Charles Dickens that Christmas calls us to the business of charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence. Christmas calls us to plant those seeds in the hearts of children, however our family is configured. For this indeed, Tiny Tim, is how God blesses us, each and every one!

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