

Getting Ready  
A homily by the Reverend Diane D. Teichert  
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
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Getting ready for this service today, I splurged on a large Menorah, because to me it's important to honor all of winter's holidays if we are going to honor any of them. Being new as your minister, I'm learning this congregation is rich with traditions for Christmas, but the only Menorah I could find here was a small one, the kind Jewish people would have at home (which is, after all, where they celebrate Hanukkah with family and friends). But it was too small to be very visible for a Hanukkah ritual in our large Meetinghouse.

To be fair, in getting ready for this service, I didn't find an Advent Wreath stored away, either. I found this Advent Earth candle. It's quite lovely, but usually Christians have an Advent Wreath in their homes, a wreath of evergreens with four candles in it, one to be lit on each of the four Sundays before Christmas, one each for Love, Hope, Joy, and Peace. It helps them remember the spiritual meanings of Christmas even in the midst of all their "getting ready" tasks and I even wrote an Advent Wreath Ceremony to use in worship services in my previous congregation for just that reason.

Many people in our Unitarian Universalist congregations celebrate Christmas, but because most of us are not specifically Christian in our beliefs, we have to be careful or the holiday loses its meaning and becomes just a lot of hectic getting ready, much of it shopping. This is true for me, too.

I'm not that surprised that you did not have a large Menorah because I'm learning that there are not very many people of Jewish background in this congregation, not as many as in the previous Unitarian Universalist congregations I've served. When I sent out a message to our list-serve and to the email list of our families in the Religious Exploration program, inviting congregants who celebrate Hanukkah to be in touch with me if they would like to light the Menorah today in the service, only three people responded, who you met during the Together Time. (So let me add, if you have friends or family who are secular Jews looking for a religious home, or have mixed Jewish-Christian marriages, Unitarian Universalism could be perfect for them. I would welcome the opportunity to welcome them here).

So, in getting ready for this service, I bought a Menorah. Next year, maybe we'll have an Advent Wreath.

Many years ago, I bought a Menorah for our family. We are not Jewish, but that year, we were to spend Christmas with one of my sisters and her family who lived in Honduras then, who we hadn't seen in a couple years, whose kids were close to ours in age, whose newly adopted son had recently joined the family. Our Christmas gift from my parents

that year was money toward the air fare so that we could celebrate Christmas in Honduras.

Well, our children wanted to know if Santa would be visiting them in Honduras!

I shuddered at the thought of packing their wrapped Christmas gifts in extra suitcases...carting them around strange airports...and re-packing them with unwrapped gifts to bring right back home...so I decided we would celebrate Hanukkah, which came well before Christmas that year.

Our children had learned about it in their Unitarian Universalist RE classes, so they knew more than I did at that point. We read together several books about Hanukkah and we learned some Hanukkah songs, we remembered what we'd seen in the homes of our Jewish friends, and we did our best to honor the tradition. Their usual three Christmas gifts each, plus what would have been stocking stuffers, comprised enough gifts for the eight nights of Hanukkah.

Since then, looking back, I wonder if I was being altogether presumptuous in celebrating Hanukkah. But, my point in telling you the story is really that the meaning of "getting ready" for the holidays can change over the years.

One way in which getting ready has *not* ever changed for me, despite my efforts to the contrary, is that I always feel behind, and inadequate to, my holiday expectations. Just one example. This year, I was getting groceries before Thanksgiving, and saw they were already selling wreaths. So I bought one, a plain one, as usual.

This year, I thought, I'm going to get started early. I'm going to find the red bow, and the big pinecones with glitter on them from one of the kid's long-ago kindergarten project, in the box of Christmas decorations in the basement, and I'm going to decorate this wreath like I always do, but this time I'm going to get it up right after Thanksgiving!

Do you know where that wreath was, until yesterday? Out in the breezeway by our kitchen door, staying cool so it wouldn't dry out. I finally put it up on the front door last night!

So, if you are behind in getting ready, you have my sympathies. I am too. As a member of the clergy, as your spiritual leader, I know that all I need to do, all you need to do too, if you are feeling that your holiday "to do" list is too long, all we need to do, is lower our expectations! Keep it simple!

I want to close with one of my favorite stories about "getting ready" for the holidays. It's a true story, told by my friend and colleague David Blanchard, one of our UU ministers in upstate New York, a gay man. It was published in the Winter 2005 *UU World* magazine, which is sent by our Unitarian Universalist Association to people who sign the

Membership Books of its member congregations, so you if you were a member back then, you may remember this story.

"Two years ago, I was part of a cleaning expedition at the church.

We were going through an area we call "the bunker," hauling out old paint cans, coffee cans full of bent nails, moldy stuffed animals, and minutes from Membership Committee meetings held during the presidency of Gerald Ford.

One of the boxes I opened, shoved way back underneath a lower shelf, appeared to be stuffed with old newspaper, but clearly had some heft to it. So I started unwrapping.

The newspapers were from 1962. The *Syracuse Herald-Journal*.

It was a crèche that had not seen the light of day in forty years.

The figurines were marked "Italy," and were finely done. There were shepherds, wise folk, angels, and an assortment of appropriate critters.

And there were two Josephs.

I ransacked the box. Turned it upside down. Went through the papers again.

Not a single Mary in sight.

And I smiled.

Yes. Of course. A holy family."

In your "getting ready" for the holidays this year, may you have moments of insight that take you to deeper places. May you smile. And come to know, in some small or large way, what is holy.

Amen.