**Monton Unitarian Church**

**6th December 2020**

**What shall we give this Christmas??**

**Welcome**

We light this chalice
Symbolic of the warmth of community and
The brightness that love brings to the world;
Illuminating our search for justice and peace;
Light, that force that nurtures all living things
Here in our midst in this flame,
So tiny and so significant.

This, our second advent service, is a service of gifts, and of giving. May we be generous with all that we give, and thankful for all that we are given.

The blessings and the wealth of Christmas can overflow from each of our hearts, if we take the time to fill our hearts first. Let us stop the rush and allow the spirit of the season to enter our being. Let us clear our vision and deepen our concern. Let it move us away from an isolating concern for self to a relationship of love and care and wonder and joy with all of life around us.

Welcome everyone to our Advent Gift Service – a service about sharing ourselves, sharing gifts and time and joy and celebration.

# Prayer – The Chalice of Our Being, by Richard S. Gilbert

“Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back.”—Dag Hammarskjold

Each morning we hold out our chalice of being
To be filled with the graces of life that abound—
Air to breathe, food to eat, companions to love,
Beauty to behold, art to cherish, causes to serve.

They come in ritual procession, these gifts of life.
Whether we deserve them we cannot know or say,
For they are poured out for us.

Our task is to hold steady the chalice of our being.

We carry the chalice with us as we go,
Either meandering aimlessly,
Or with destination in our eye.

We share its abundance if we have any sense,
Reminding others as we remind ourselves
Of the contents of the chalice we don’t deserve.

Water from living streams fills it
If only we hold it out faithfully.

We give back, if we can, something of ourselves—
Some love, some beauty, some grace, some gift.

We give back in gratitude if we can
Something like what is poured into our chalice of being—
For those who abide with us and will follow.

Each morning we hold out the chalice of our being,
To receive, to carry, to give back.

And let those of us who wish to say together the Lord’s Prayer, that speaks of the gift of both bread and forgiveness.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,

For ever and ever, Amen.

**Story – 12 days of Christmas part 1**

The Twelve Thank you notes of Christmas, Emily to Edward

Dec 25th

My dearest darling Edward, what a wonderful surprise has just greeted me! That sweet partridge, in that lovely little pear-tree; what an enchanting, romantic, poetic present! Bless you, and thank you. Your deeply loving Emily.

Dec 26th

Beloved Edward, the two turtle doves arrived this morning, and are cooing away in the pear-tree as I write. I’m so touched and grateful! With undying love, as always, Emily.

Dec 27th

My darling Edward, you do think of the most original presents! Who ever thought of sending anybody three French hens? Do they really come all the way from France? It’s a pity we have no chicken coops but I expect we’ll find some. Anyway, thank you so much; they’re lovely.

Dec 28th

Dearest Edward, What a surprise! Four calling birds arrived this morning. They are very sweet, even if they do call rather loudly – they make telephoning almost impossible – but I expect they’ll calm down when they get used to their new home. Anyway, I’m very grateful of course I am. Love from Emily.

Dec 29th

Dearest Edward, the mailman has just delivered five most beautiful gold rings, one for each finger, and all fitting perfectly! A really lovely present! Lovelier, in a way, than birds, which do take rather a lot of looking after. The four that arrived yesterday are still making a terrible row, and I’m afraid none of us got much sleep last night. Mother says she wants to use the rings, to “wring” their necks. Mother has such a sense of humour. This time she’s only joking, I think, but I do know what she means. Still, I love the rings. Bless you, Emily.

**Music**

# Reading – Leveling Up, by Karen G. Johnston

*“Level Two is where you become privy to the giant mystery, the fabulous conspiracy that is Santa. You are entrusted with the secret, that Santa is SO much bigger than you imagined, that you, in fact, get to be Santa, too.”*
—Rev. Joanna Fontaine Crawford

One year—but not the year the Christmas tree fell on me at midnight, causing me to weep with self-pity and exhaustion—I was so happy with how the tree looked, with all the presents underneath it, including the ones that “Santa brought” in their different-than-the-others’-wrapping-paper, that I took a photo before going to bed, wanting to preserve perfection.

A few months later, my two kids were in the back seat of our car, looking at that image, when the younger one said, in a confused tone of voice, “Who took that photo?” She realized something was amiss. Her young mind had observed that it had to have been taken after Santa brought presents and but before the presents were opened—and she and her sister were always the first downstairs on Christmas morning.

The dreaded “two plus two equals Santa-Claus-does-not-exist” moment seemed to be upon us. I wasn't ready for this moment, which eventually visits Christmas-celebrating families. Or tooth fairy families. Or Three Kings families.

I hesitated, not sure what to say.

Thankfully, despite the fact that the older sibling had been teasing and tormenting the younger one moments before, on a dime she became her younger sister’s protector.  Invoking full older sibling authority, she asserted, “Don’t you remember when Mommy took that picture just before we got to open our presents?”

Since I was driving, I couldn’t see what passed between the two of them—what shared gaze of questioning or trust or oblivion or wishful thinking. I just know that with that single generous gesture, my younger child’s belief in Santa stayed intact that year (and years to come: much longer than most).

More sweetly, my older one took her first step toward being a Level Two Santa: sustaining the magic and generosity, and becoming part of it herself. For this parent, it was the best Christmas gift that year. Maybe ever.

Spirit of Magic and Generosity, Spirit of Love in All Beings: May all children be loved, at all times of the year, knowing delight and generosity from many sources, becoming delight and generosity directed outward. When given the option, may we all choose to become Santa, rather than not believe.

# Prayer – A Christmas Prayer. by Maureen Killoran

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find, the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

I would (if I could)

have for you the gift of courage,
the strength to face the gauntlets
only you can name,
and the firmness in your heart to know
that you (yes, you!) can be a bearer of the quiet dignity
that is the human glorified.

I would (if by my intention I could make it happen)

have for you the gift of connection,
the sense of standing on the hinge of time,
touching past and future
standing with certainty that you (yes, you!)
are the point where it all comes together.

I would (if wishing could make it so)
have for you the gift of community,
a nucleus of love and challenge,
to convince you in your soul
that you (yes, you!) are a source of light
in a world too long believing in the dark.

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense, would I have for you this season,
but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find, the ones that are perfect,
even for those who have everything (if such there be).

So let us share a time of silence together, as we think of all the spiritual gifts we would give to the ones we love, and the ones who are still strangers, this Christmas.

Not gold, nor myrrh, nor even frankincense, would I have for this season,

but simple gifts, the ones that are hardest to find, the ones that are perfect,

even for those who have everything (if such there be).

Amen.

**Music**

**Reflection**

It’s been interesting over the last few years, watching my children make the transition from Christmas being all about the getting, to being significantly more interested in the giving side. When they were little, their names got tacked on to whatever present was being given from the family as a whole, but then the year came when Amy declared she wanted to go and buy her own presents for people, initially just siblings, grandparents, two cousins, and a best friend, and then slowly it expanded, then Max joined in, and so it went.

But there’s different ways of dealing with the whole Christmas giving thing, even just within our family. There’s the – ‘have to make sure each person has equal value’ – the ‘have to make sure that it’s something they really want’ against the ‘just going to get them something fun’ and even the ‘spreading Christmas out over the year to respond to unexpected things, like theatre trips or music lessons, rather than buying stuff in one month just for the sake of it’.

It is lovely being given gifts, I don’t think many folks would deny that – and it’s lovely giving people things too. Whether it’s for someone close to you, taking the time to sit and think what someone would really appreciate, whether it’s something useful, or something fun, something beautiful or something quirky – or whether it’s for someone you don’t know (who’s been in Secret Santa’s before now, where you try to find something that will cover a multitude of personalities, but isn’t just another chocolate orange (though I’d always be happy with a chocolate orange!!)). Or indeed, whether it’s a special trip to the food bank, taking not just the standard selection of food and hygiene goods but maybe some extra treats – because why shouldn’t food bank clients get special food and bubble bath at Christmas as well as everybody else?

Giving can also be quite a risky business, of course. I still remember buying what I thought were a beautiful pair of earrings for a school friend I was really fond of – she opened it in the class room, and I was met with a chorus of ridicule and disapproval for getting that particular style. I made sure whenever I gave presents after that, firstly that I’d somehow sounded out the person beforehand, and that I gave the present in private – being judged by a whole classful of kids was not an amusing experience! It can be misread as trying to buy someone’s affections, or push them towards a particular activity, or those two traps of either buying something for someone that you want to use yourself, or buying something extra special and then being asked what you are trying to apologise for!

Giving gifts is beginning to sound like a veritable minefield! But of course there’s some gifts that we know will always be welcome, and useful, and fun, and precious for a long time to come (that last one cancels out the Terry’s chocolate orange by the way, because they just don’t last long enough in my household!).

There’s the gift of encouragement. Whether someone is struggling in a particular situation, or trying to learn something new, or just trying to get from one day to the next, it is such a gift if you acknowledge that you see the efforts they are making, that you are proud of them, no matter how little progress they may think they are making, that even the tiniest steps, or even just standing still, is a feat to be celebrated.

There’s the gift of listening. The number of times I’ve heard people say, oh but I shouldn’t complain, and wanted to say, it’s not complaining to admit that life’s hard, it’s not complaining to confess that you’re lonely, it’s not complaining even to ask for help – it’s honesty. And it’s giving someone else the gift of being able to show you compassion by listening – and maybe even offering some practical help.

There’s the gift of presence. This has been a difficult one this year, with so many of us having to isolate, survive lockdowns, club and support group and church closures, not being able to visit friends and family. But while it’s not the same, and while we will definitely be making the most of it when we are allowed to do all of those things again, there is still the presence of a phone call, of a letter, of an email, or if we are lucky a walk in the park – we can still let people know how much they are loved and held, and how they do not have to struggle alone.

There’s so many other gifts like that that you can give. In the children’s chocolate advent calendar (it’s a sewn snowman with 25 pockets that we fill with chocolate coins each year) I’ve also started putting little notes in some days – “Today you can claim an extra hug at a time of your choosing”, “Today I want to tell you that YOU ARE AMAZING”, “Today, remember that you are becoming your own person – be proud!” They cost nothing but time and a little bit of deliberation and commitment and compassion. And because they can be cashed in by the recipient whenever they need them, there’s no risk of rejection – your offer will stand there until it’s needed, and sometimes just knowing that the offer is there is enough.

So enjoy giving what you can this Christmas – whether it’s a set of colourful post-it notes, a beautiful flower, some time on the telephone, or a walk in the park. And when someone offers you a gift, remember that even if it’s not exactly what you wanted or expected, or something that you need, that it comes bundled with the gift of love.

Although, hopefully, it won’t end up quite as disastrously as Edward’s gifts to Emily – we’d made it up to five rings, and it wasn’t going too badly – but let’s hear what happened after that!

**Story – 12 days of Christmas part 2**

Dec 30th

Dear Edward, whatever I expected to find when I opened the front door this morning, it certainly wasn’t six socking great geese laying eggs all over the porch. Frankly, I rather hoped that you had stopped sending me birds. We have no room for them and they’ve already ruined the croquet lawn. I know you meant well, but let’s call a halt, shall we? Love, Emily.

Dec 31st

Edward, I thought I said NO MORE BIRDS. This morning I woke up to find no more than seven swans, all trying to get into our tiny goldfish pond. I’d rather not think what’s happened to the goldfish. The whole house seems to be full of birds, to say nothing of what they leave behind them, so please, please, stop! Your Emily.

Jan 1st

Frankly, I prefer the birds. What am I to do with eight milkmaids? And their cows! Is this some kind of a joke? If so, I’m afraid I don’t find it very amusing. Emily.

Jan 2nd

Look here, Edward, this has gone far enough. You say you’re sending me nine ladies dancing. All I can say is, judging from the way they dance, they’re certainly not ladies. The village just isn’t accustomed to seeing a regiment of shameless viragos, with nothing on but their lipstick, cavorting round the green, and it’s mother and I who get the blame. If you value our friendship, which I do (less and less), kindly stop this ridiculous behaviour at once! Emily.

Jan 3rd

As I write this letter, ten disgusting old men are prancing up and down all over what used to be the garden, before the geese and the swans and the cows got at it. And several of them, I have just noticed, are taking inexcusable liberties with the milkmaids. Meanwhile the neighbours are trying to have us evicted. I shall never speak to you again. Emily.

Jan 4th

This is the last straw! You know I detest bagpipes! The place has now become something between a menagerie and a madhouse, and a man from the council has just declared it unfit for habitation. At least mother has been spared this last outrage; they took her away yesterday afternoon in an ambulance to a home for the bewildered. I hope you’re satisfied.

Jan 5th

Sir. Our client, Miss Emily Wilbraham, instructs me to inform you that with the arrival on her premises at 7.30 this morning of the entire percussion section of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and several of their friends, she has no course left open to her but to seek an injunction to prevent you importuning her further. I am making arrangements for the return of much assorted livestock. I am, sir, yours faithful, G Green, Attorney at law.

Oh dear. Let’s hope we don’t misjudge our gifts as badly as Edward did! Enjoy receiving this Christmas – and enjoy giving. And whatever else you give, give of your love – the world needs some extra of that this year!

**Blessing – by John C Morgan**

In the end it won’t matter how much we have, but how generously we have given.

It won’t matter how much we know, but rather how well we live.

And it won’t matter how much we believe, but how deeply we love.

Let us bless and keep one another. Let kindness rule in our hearts and compassion in our lives, until we meet again. Amen.