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Kennebunk, Maine  
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### "Love Came Down At Christmas"

One of my favorite holiday rituals is trimming the tree. Unwrapping each ornament is like unwrapping a memory, each one, an old friend.

There are stars, moons and angels that must be hung near the top that fill me again with the wonder of a child searching the night sky for a bright star in the east, for Santa. How I longed to believe. I guess I still do.

There are all kinds of animals, both wild and domestic and trees, lots of trees, and fruit; each a sacred object honoring the beauty and bounty of the natural world.

There are peace cranes made from folded paper, each one a wish for peace on earth.

Santa is well-represented, invoking the Spirit of Giving. And there are tributes to more secular Christmas favorites; Rudolf and Snoopy - even Wonder Woman and the Jetsons.

A friend who was visiting last weekend said that ours was a "very Unitarian" Christmas tree and it is. It reflects my beliefs - my values. And like any good Unitarian Universalist I draw inspiration from a lot of different traditions including Buddhism, Christianity, Humanism, the teachings of science and earth-centered spiritualities.

But I do have a favorite ornament, strategically placed, front and center on our tree. It's a white silk rose, tied to a papier-mâché heart with a white ribbon. The ribbon is inscribed with the words "Love came down at Christmas". Jesus is the rose, born to open our hearts to one another. That's what Christmas means to me.

At a very early age I learned that God is simply another word for love and that Jesus spent his life teaching people to love one another. I know the stories about the baby Jesus in the manger and the shepherds and the wise men didn't really happen. But there is a kernel of truth in those stories for me --- Jesus was so filled with love that he loved everyone - the way a young child loves everyone - unconditionally. And each time I hear the old stories I feel called again to try to follow him as I long for good will and peace on earth.

Jesus' love was a radical kind of love; a love that was threatening to those in power because this love was for everyone, not just a privileged few. My colleague the Rev. Eric Wikstrom writes, "Looking at the world with God's eyes, he came to see all people as divine and all things as sacred; for him there were no distinctions. ...the apostle Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in ... Jesus."

I think Jesus would have loved the television commercial produced by the United Church of Christ for broadcast earlier this month. Two muscle-bound bouncers serve as gatekeepers at the foot of the stairs leading into a church. The bouncers step aside to let some people pass. But to others they say things like "No - step aside please" and "No way, not you, - I don't think so." Then a voice says, "Jesus doesn't turn people away no matter who you are or where you are on your life's journey. You are welcome here!

It's a great commercial with a message that would make Jesus proud. In fact, I can almost hear him saying, "Bravo - but what took you so long to take my message to the airwaves?" But two of the major networks refused to air the commercial saying its content was too controversial.

Specifically, CBS wrote, "Because this commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups by other individuals and organizations, and the fact the Executive Branch has recently proposed a constitutional amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast."

Apparently, Jesus' message of radical love is just as controversial today as it was 2000 years ago. It threatens those in power who would use difference

to deny people their place in the human family. But the good news is that there are a lot of people who believe in the power of love - not a sappy, sentimental kind of love but a love that calls us to open our hearts to one another across the differences that threaten to divide us.

This kind of love isn't easy. It can make you uncomfortable as Danny Merrill found out when he opened his heart to Sagging Sal. He didn't want to let her in at first. He wanted to pretend that she didn't exist so he could go on enjoying Christmas the way it had always been. But Dan opened his heart and let Sagging Sal in and Danny realized that Sagging Sal was part of his family. That's Jesus' message - that's the message of Christmas.

So tonight, when the light from the candle representing the baby Jesus is passed from one person to the next until every face is reflected in the beauty of candlelight - I want you to think of the light we're passing as the light of love. As the light moves through the sanctuary, think about the light as love reflected in each human face. Once everyone has received the light, imagine what it would be like if the light continued to radiate out from here; to people passing by on the street, to people you don't know, to people who don't look, or dress, or act or think the way you do.

Pass this light of love to the homeless, the hungry, the poor, those who are alone, or ill or infirm. Pass the light on to all those places in the world that are plagued by violence and pray that Jesus' simple, yet profoundly difficult message of radical love will make its way into the hearts of divided people everywhere.

May it be so.

Amen.