

Family Christmas Homily
All Souls Church
December 18th, 2011
Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach

It was Christmas in Minnesota, my first and only as a student minister at Unity Church, Unitarian in St. Paul. In Minnesota it gets very very cold, much colder than it does here in New York. The first snow fell in October and continued to fall steadily each week. Each time I looked out the window, I was reminded of the words of the hymn from the poet Christina Rossetti.

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,*

The snow drifted high up on the sidewalks and against the houses and up on the chimneys. My car refused to start. It was so cold that no one wanted to spend much time outside, least of all me. The earth indeed felt hard as iron, and as the temperature dropped people became more isolated. I hated the cold and was constantly chided for my inadequate preparation for the Minnesota climate. I missed my overheated New York apartment, the bustling streets filled with people, even the crowded subway rides.

The Sunday before Christmas, I was invited to go caroling through the streets with a group of members after church, just as we do today. I was skeptical about being outside in the bitter cold, even though I was assured that there would be hot cocoa and cookies before and a soup supper afterwards. Truth be told, it wasn't just the cold that made me skeptical about caroling. I wasn't so sure how I felt about the idea of caroling at all. I loved reveling in the caroling tradition in the comfort of the sanctuary, but out in the neighborhood?

I imagined us walking the frozen sidewalks and singing Christmas carols to cars speeding by and knocking on the doors of indifferent strangers. The church was located in a neighborhood where it seemed like most of our neighbors were quite different than us, culturally and religiously. Many of the houses were boarded up with eviction notices and foreclosure signs—not welcoming in the least. What would our neighbors think of us, a group of middle-class, white Unitarian Universalists, singing our hearts out about angels, miracles and the birth of Jesus? I wasn't so sure at all.

And yet, I was convinced, persuaded ultimately by a seven-year old girl named Vivian. After church, she had presented me with a beautiful drawing of a red rose, my favorite winter flower, and promised to hold my mittened hand if we could carol together. How could I say no? So I bundled up in my winter best for our carol sing.

We were a jolly crew, about a dozen of us, roaming the streets with our voices and spirits strong. We sang *Joy to the World* to the speeding cars and noticed their friendly honking and waving as we walked by. We sang *O Christmas Tree* to the hungry cardinals in the tall, snow-covered evergreens and began to hear their sweet winter songs joining ours. We sang *Deck the Halls* to the boarded up houses and noticed children smiling at us through cracked and shuttered windows. We knocked on doors singing *We Three Kings* and were welcomed with cookies and the kind eyes of old friends. As promised, Vivian held my hand, encouraging me to sing loudly and joyfully. My fears melted away and I hardly noticed the

cold at all.

Our last stop was only blocks from the church. We looked forward to returning to the comforts of warmth and familiarity. We were greeted by two somber gentlemen and invited into the small apartment. It soon became clear that something upsetting had happened, and not very long ago. People were crying and had gathered around an older woman in a recliner. I thought at first she was sick, and went to her side to offer a pastoral greeting from the church. As I approached, she reached out to grab my hand and with large tearful eyes told me her teenage grandson had been killed in gang violence earlier that week. She asked for prayer and all eyes in the room rested on me expectantly. For a moment, I wondered what I could possibly give to ease the pain? What could I say, what could I do? I thought again of the words of the poet from the hymn, *In the Bleak Midwinter*:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.*

I invited everyone to link hands and closed my eyes, letting the spirit move me to speak a word of prayer for the hope of Christmas. I spoke of peace on earth, the brother and sisterhood of humankind, the hope of new life in the midst of suffering, God's unending, eternal love. Black and white, old and young, strangers became neighbors as tears flowed and we exchanged embraces. We parted ways and returned back to the church quietly, our voices soft against the snow as we sang *Silent Night*.

Christmas is a time when we muster the courage to give our hearts to one another, stranger and friend, to choose hope in spite of the pain of the world. It is a time when we stretch through fear to find a larger love that unites all people, across our perceived differences.

To prepare for Christmas is to prepare a way for risk, vulnerability and tenderness, against the calcified crust of a cynical world. To raise our voices in carols of hope, peace and joy is to bless the world and in return be blessed. Your minister Forrest Church spoke often of "emptying ourselves to be filled, losing ourselves to be found, giving our hearts away though they will surely be broken." So today, as we prepare to leave this place of comfort, beauty and tradition let us empty ourselves to be filled with the miracles of Christmas. In our going, may we give of our hearts freely, opening to the sustaining and transforming power of love, in this season and into the New Year. Amen, and Merry Christmas.