

For most of the world's Christians, today is the first day of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation, reflection and expectant waiting; not only for the celebration of the Savior's birth but also for their belief in the second coming of the Christ.

The ideas underpinning both the parable of the ten bridesmaids; the parable of the talents can seem to be quite troubling. Five of the bridesmaids prepared themselves. They brought their lamps. They brought their oil. Five others, given an equal opportunity to prepare themselves, did not. They brought no oil. Five were rewarded. Five were not.

A landowner going on a journey entrusts his wealth to his servants. All but one of the servants prepares for the return of the landowner by investing that that that was entrusted to them. They are rewarded. The other servant fails to invest that that was entrusted him. He is cast out.

Both the parable of the bridesmaids and the parable of the talents, which appear one after the other in Matthew 25, are parables of expectant waiting and preparation. Yet the parable of the talents end with the following line: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away (Matthew 25:29)." This is troubling statement for many Unitarian Universalists. As with many biblical references, however, it is usually taken out of context; and this statement has been used to justify everything from racism and white supremacy to the prosperity gospel – that we are entitled to be rich, etc...

Yet this is not possible when taken in context because immediately following these parables Jesus then talks about eventual judgement.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then [he] will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom *prepared for you* from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And [he] will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it for the least of these...you did it to me (Matthew 25:32-40)."

For Christians, I see these parables as Advent parables. For non-Christians, they can still be parables of preparation; not parables that justify oppression and worldly riches but parables that encourage us to be vigilant in our preparation to become a part of something more, something bigger, something deeper, something that was *prepared for us – prepared for you*.

But maybe you're not a Christian, or you don't see your Christianity in the same light – with the separating of sheep from goats, right hand and left hand, heaven and hell. Yet regardless of how you see this, what might a season of Advent, a season of preparation, reflection and expectant waiting mean for you, mean for us as Unitarian Universalists and as members of UUMAN?

Kwanza is weeklong celebration of African culture that is celebrated in countries of the African diaspora. It runs from Dec 26 to Jan 1. It is a celebration more like Thanksgiving than Christmas in that it celebrates in gratitude first fruits and harvests.

Kwanza celebrates seven principles known as the Nguzo Saba. Here they are. Tell me what you notice:

- building a community that holds together
- speaking for yourself and making choices that benefit the community
- helping others within the community
- supporting businesses that care about the community
- setting goals that benefit the community
- making the community better and more beautiful
- believing that a better world can be created for communities now and in the future

So, what did you notice in the Nguzo Saba, the seven principles of Kwanza? They all focus on community – and that’s wonderful.

Actually, not in all contexts, but in certain church contexts, when I hear the word “community” or “family” or “tribe” or “my people,” red flags go up for me. (Ok, maybe they aren’t red flags, maybe they are cautionary yellow flags.)

Coming to a church simply to be part of a community or tribe feels a bit false to me. A church is not a club. I’ve spoken about this many times this fall but being a member of a church means being in covenant with other members in service to the church’s mission. Remember...taking off the bib and putting on the apron? Being of service rather than being served? It’s more about preparing than about consuming.

Yes, part of our mission is to nurture transformative growth in ourselves and in one another. We should be growing in our faith as Unitarian Universalists; but the community that we have is created as a result of our actions and our service to

mission. Community and a sense of belonging are what we get. They are part the fruits of our efforts.

Kwanza works the same way. It is celebration of thanksgiving and gratitude for the work and action done that creates, benefits and sustains the community.

Might the season of Advent help us claim, through our preparation, that which was prepared for us? And what is it that would be prepared for us? What might be the fruits of our efforts?

I'm a firm believer in you get what you give. Preparing yourself through worship, faith development, adult enrichment, small group ministry, social justice...all of this is preparation – is what you give. A vibrant community, a deeper, more robust and fully-developed spirituality and sense of being are, at least part of, what you get.

Personally, first walking through the doors of a Unitarian Universalist congregation was one of the best decisions of my entire life. On my first day, I was simply looking for relief. I was a new parent, the sole “breadwinner” supporting the family in a highly stressful job. I needed to be served. I am so grateful that after being served and after I found relief that I stayed in the game. I could have left. I'd received my fill.

We seem live in a culture where the norm takes us from breakdown to breakdown. Breakdowns separated by, at best by periods of denial; at worst, periods of fear – fearing the next breakdown. Instead of truly investing, many bury their talents in fear. They seem to only look for relief in quick fixes and surface solutions ones that don't require real investment. And once they get that quick fix, they kid themselves into thinking they're whole and they leave; not needing church any longer. “Church? What church? Why?” Many completely fail to see the opportunity before them. They fail to see the church as a vehicle – a vehicle of investment and preparation, reflection and expectant waiting. A vehicle that can transform your life from the seemingly endless cycle of breakdowns

toward something beautiful and whole; a vehicle that can take you places you'd never imagine. It brought me here...and I'm loving it.

Twenty five years ago, for some reason, maybe it was simply luck, after I found relief I stayed at my church. And unknowingly, I began to prepare myself, invest in the talents entrusted to me. As a Unitarian Universalist, I have prepared. I have given. I have committed. I have worked - and I still continue to do all these things. And, despite life's occasional setbacks, it never fails me, I continue to get what I give – a hundred times over. It defies the laws of nature. It makes no sense. I always get back more than I give. Try it!!!

I believe that this reality is what Jesus is referring to when he says, “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away (Matthew 25:29).”

The Hanukkah holiday begins this evening at sundown and runs through December 10. This holiday commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The First Temple, built by King Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. was destroyed by in 589 B.C. by the Babylonian leader Nebuchadnezzar. The 12 tribes of Israel were scattered but later allowed to return in 530 B.C. at which time the Second Temple was built. This Second Temple was again taken, defiled and re-taken several times throughout history. Hanukkah commemorates one of the times that this Second Temple was re-taken during the Maccabean Revolt around 160 B.C. During the rededication of the Second Temple, the Jews only had enough purification oil to last one day, yet the temple menorah miraculously stayed lit for eight days. During each night of this holiday, the Jewish people light one additional candle of their Hanukkah menorah as a reminder of this miracle.

Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple. The Advent season is a time of preparation, reflection and expectant waiting. By some miraculous coincidence, we will, in a way, during this Hanukkah and Advent season, begin to rededicate ourselves to this congregation, prepare ourselves for

our future together through our upcoming re-visioning process this coming Saturday, December 8. I do believe that the fact that this rededication and preparation will commence during both the Hanukkah and Advent seasons is indicative of a coming UUMAN miracle! We didn't plan it this way, yet the stars have aligned and it will bring us good fortune. I can feel it. So, if you want to be a part of the UUMAN miracle, you're going to want to be here next Saturday at 8:30AM. Yes, 8:30AM.

“From those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. Yet to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, (Matthew 25:29).”