

Enough is as good as a feast December 10, 2017

We were buying food for the Thanksgiving feast at the regional market and wanted to get dinner rolls. But when we got to our usual vendor, we found they were all out. No problem, right? Just go to Wegman's or Tops and get some. But it made me think about whether or not we needed dinner rolls. Did we want them or were we just getting them because we always have them for Thanksgiving, if never at any other time. Did we need them? Would they even be eaten? And what would the world be like if we couldn't find, somewhere, somehow, everything we thought we wanted? What is enough? What is not enough? And what is too much?

Perhaps the biggest question is, would I choose to write about this topic at any time other than what is called the Holiday Season? The holiday season, which is supposed to take in a number of traditions but is really, as we all know, about trying to deal with multiculturalism (but that's a different topic). At any rate, the Holiday Season is when people like me enjoy or are repulsed by or try to find a way to respond to the barrage of messages that are given us every day, both overtly and covertly. In other words, an intensification of the lives we live the rest of the year.

Our economy depends on consumers. The holiday season is where merchants make the bulk of their income which is then distributed in wages to

employees in retail, manufacturing and then throughout the rest of the economy. So, yes, what happens in this season is vital to all of us on that level. But at the same time, our actions matter to us, personally. If we go into debt buying things, if we are filled with guilt about either buying or not buying, if we deny ourselves those things we desire, if we do not deny ourselves those things we desire, if we decide for others what they should have or not have, all those possibilities have some impact on our own lives as well as the economic life of the country.

There are many aspects of our lives that mark us out as UU's but one which is not, perhaps, always made explicit, is that of our moral stance. I may be making a huge leap, and I certainly don't know enough about philosophy to make this leap, apologies to Winfield and others as I jump, but, I can tell you what was the rule in my house when I was growing up as a UU. I found it expressed much later by Mr. Kant. And it was this: Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Roughly, that meant that I should not do something unless I thought it was the right thing for everyone to do. Don't litter because if everyone littered the whole world would be a big garbage can. Don't buy products from countries with dictatorship because if everyone didn't buy those products, the dictatorship would crumble. It's that sort of thing. And the reason I think this goes to the heart of being a UU is not just because my UU parents and my UU church taught me this at an impressionable age, but

because, and here I am quoting the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on Immanuel Kant' concept, The Categorical Imperative.

“The fundamental principle of morality — the C[ategorical] I[mperative]— is none other than the law of an autonomous will. Thus, at the heart of Kant’s moral philosophy is a conception of reason whose reach in practical affairs goes well beyond that of a Humean ‘slave’ to the passions. Moreover, it is the presence of this self-governing reason in each person that Kant thought offered decisive grounds for viewing each as possessed of equal worth and deserving of equal respect.”

We believe in both aspects of this. We believe that all people possess the ability to reason and we believe that, because of this, in the worth and dignity of each person. And we do not want to be slaves to our passions.

Now what, if anything, does this have to do with the Holiday Season? It is the same rule that we apply to our actions all year long, but one we are more conscious of and, I might guess, more conflicted by it at this time of year.

There are different ways of dealing with the Holiday Season. Many of them are contemporary echoes of old arguments. In the early years of Christianity, Advent was a season for fasts, not for feasts. This followed pre-Christian patterns, patters of fast and feast that followed natural cycles. Storing food, eating large

quantities of food, all this reflected the rhythms of nature that did not, like the supermarket, give food in the same measure each day or each season. But we no longer have those natural cycles of fast and feast to limit our ability to consume. How do we deal with a society that appears to have unending abundance?

People are amazing, not only in their ability to adapt, but also to make something greater of bare necessity. People make rituals to create meaning out of those necessities. In the days of fast and feast, rituals and holidays were born around those natural cycles. Rituals become traditions and come to be part of the fabric of our lives. Those rituals also evolve to fit changing times. The tug of war between feast and fast was played out in the rituals of Christmas, most notably between Puritans and non-Puritans in the beginning days of our country, with Puritans banning Christmas as a holiday at all in New England. Well, we know that won't fly any more.

Perhaps that is true of any prohibition that works against the natural, thank heavens, tendency of people to want to celebrate, to want variety and color and fun. On the other hand, when there is excess all around, when there is nothing but the appeal to the desires for celebration and fun, a more puritanical, with the emphasis on the part of the word that means pure, can become very attractive. It promises sanity and much needed restraint. It speaks to a reasoned and thoughtful

way of life, If we followed the Categorical Imperative, wouldn't the world be better off, our resources less depleted, if we took a firmer stance against excess. Yes, there is something to be said for Puritanism. But there is also a danger in Puritanism. When it becomes an end in itself, it can become narrow and dogmatic. It can deny the sources of life and joy. It preaches and it demands and it allows little in the way of a variety of response. And that is always a temptation, a temptation as great as the temptation to indulge too much.

The impulse to excess is often as motivated by love as by hedonism. It is not always a case of buying people's affection. It is not always a case of status seeking. It can also be the sheer joy of seeing a child excited by the holiday, by the lights and the cookies and Santa and yes, the toys. And we know this is not just for children. We give because we love. Because we love, we want to surprise and to delight. The impulse to exuberance is often motivated by the appreciation of the good in the life we live, the good of all our senses fully employed in worship of the bounty we are given. Nature abounds in excess and we are here to appreciate all the glory, all the creative use of the bounty laid before us. Yet we know, more in these times than ever, that the cycle of nature is not to be trifled with, that excess unbridled creates a bill that must be paid. That is on a global scale, excessive consumption devastates our environment. Consumption of resources is moving so fast that we now consume all of a year's resources in six months. That means, by

June of this year, all the resources available were used up. And, of course, that means that if we, by which I mean the developed countries, used a vast amount of these resources, it left even less for the underdeveloped parts of the world.

What of the fact that, in the way we manufacture those things that amuse and entertain us, we create a huge amount of waste that must go somewhere, that further pollutes the air, water and earth. That exacerbates weather extremes, wildfires and the inundation of coastlines. This will be a bill that comes due, is coming due.

And what of the fact that, as we spend on the million useless articles we are told will please those we love, such as sixty foot Santas for our front lawns or toy cars that cost as much as regular cars used to, at the same time, very close to us, many people spend Christmas at shelters, and are only able to give to their children through Toys for Tots or other charity programs. When does our generosity to those we love give way to our generosity to those we don't know. And that includes the generosity of restraint.

On an individual level, excess will send in its account as well, whether in damage to our minds, our bodies, or, if we are lucky, only to our credit cards. There is a danger in excess that it becomes habit forming, that buying our pleasures and ameliorating the boredom of everyday life can lead us away from pleasures to be

found every day, in our loved ones, in each other, in the silence of our minds and thoughts. Unfortunately, gifts cannot give love when there is no love to be given. Too many times, Christmas becomes the time when old hurts are resurrected, when old wounds are opened, when, 'but look what I gave you' becomes a way to burden, to obscure a situation, to avoid the hard work of real relationships. And we are all good at fooling ourselves.

What does make for joy, for peace, for a good holiday, for a good life? When do we know we have done that magic amount, enough and that enough is as good as a feast? The good news and the bad news is that I can't tell you the answer. This is the price we pay for freedom of thought. This is the glory and the burden of belonging to the free church.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure the good old Categorical Imperative gives as much help as we might wish either. One use of this rule can be countered by another use of this rule. Exuberance and providence, generosity and stewardship, all jostle each other in deciding what is the best way to live.

To make matters worse, it becomes increasingly hard to know what are our genuine needs and wants. We have been told that we want so many things and that we owe it to our loved ones to give them so many things, that it is harder and harder to know where to draw lines. Are we Grinches if we don't give enough? Or

are we searching for a truer meaning of the season? And what would that be? How much are we kidding ourselves, no matter what decision we make?

Unfortunately, I can't give you the perfect answer for these dilemmas. I share them. Instead, I'm going to commiserate with you about the difficulty of living in a world in which choice is almost overwhelming, in which everything seems possible and easy and, is, in reality, really tough. We have adopted and adapted some of the rituals of Christmas. They seem to stay with us no matter that we think differently about this holiday than our more orthodox neighbors. Holidays and traditions are hard to uproot. Should we, could we, find a different way to celebrate? What would that look like? How would we find it? How can we find an authentic way to celebrate and at the same time adapt to the new realities of life, realities that include the depletion of resources, the pollution of the environment and the increasing gap between those who have and those who do not.

As people of a free religion, we believe in creative solutions. Our roots are necessary but so are our wings. We do not despair because at heart we believe in people's ability to find new solutions, to adapt, to make a new and better day. Ultimately, we believe in the force for goodness lying deep in people. This is what keeps us going when the world seems to be heading in the wrong direction. Past generations believed in us and we pass on that belief. We believe in the possibility



of people finding balance, finding the ways to change so that humans can flourish.

We believe that we can all get enough to make a feast and still leave plenty over for other people's dinners. All of us here are part of a religion that simply asks us to live mindfully, thoughtfully and honestly, honestly with ourselves, honestly with others, honestly as best we are able, to find what we truly need, what makes our holidays, and everyone's holidays, merry and bright and fulfilled, just like the rest of the year.