MR DICKENS HOLIDAY

A sermon preached by the Rev. John H. Nichols to the First Parish of Wayland, Ma. on December 9, 2012

"Marley is dead, to begin with." That is the opening line of Charles Dickens most famous Christmas story. “Marley is dead.” There is no way around it, none whatsoever. We have to understand this or we won't understand the story. Marley is dead. Dead as a doornail. Dead. It does seem a strange way to begin a Christmas story, particularly a story that the author desperately needed to sell. His literary career was hanging in the balance. His prospects for future success were themselves almost... well.. dead. His growing family was facing serious debt and poverty.

To make matters even stranger, after he reflected on the matter of death Dickens goes on about the theme of coldness. In describing Ebenezer Scrooge he says, "A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog days (of summer) and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas."

Mr. Dickens, what has gotten into you? This Christmas story could ruin you and your family. You paid for the full cost of publication. Even your publishers no longer have any confidence in you, and now you are writing a Christmas story about death and ghosts, haunting, poverty and despair? Where can this possibly lead? To the poor house again?

There was not a large market for Christmas stories to begin with. Christmas was not a major holiday in the 1840s. It was not a holiday at all for the poor. Rich people used it an excuse for a sort of high-class orgy. But when Ebenezer reluctantly gives his clerk, Bob Cratchit, the day off to celebrate Christmas, and he says Cratchit is robbing him of that day's pay, he is not alone in that attitude. Many middle and working class people in England felt or had been treated the same way. Scrooge also spoke for many people when he called Christmas a “Humbug.”

The Industrial Revolution was in full swing. Profits were in the saddle. Many people worshipped progress and the accumulation of wealth. The poor had to scramble to get whatever security they could find or they would be forced to accept the meager comforts of poor houses and imprisonment for their debts. For all classes, religion had become like a beloved but irrelevant great aunt. It's nice to have "Auntie" around but, of course, we all know she is hopelessly old fashioned and out of date.

This was the culture for which Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol." Ebenezer Scrooge seems a caricature to us, but Dickens readers knew him very well -- many even knew him intimately. And they knew the Cratchits. They had

seen hundreds of Tiny Tims live briefly and then perish for lack of adequate care. The story was an arrow aimed straight at the conscience of Victorian England. For a young man who desperately needed to sell a successful book in order to feed his family, it was a brave but risky public statement that there is a higher law than profits.

This briefly is how “A Christmas Carol” goes. It is Christmas Eve. Scrooge is falling off to sleep after a long day at the counting house when suddenly a dreadful apparition appears to him. It is the ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley.

Marley is wrapped in chains, which hold locked strong boxes. He has been condemned to roam the earth, seeking in death the chances he passed by in life, the chances to lighten the load of his fellow men and women. Marley has come back to give Ebenezer one last chance to avoid the same fate. Scrooge will be visited that night by three ghosts: the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. Marley urges Scrooge to go with them and see what they have to show him.

Christmas Past takes Scrooge on a tour of his own growing up. He sees himself again as a lonely boy whose closest companions were his books. He remembers longing for the presence and warmth of real people in his life. He encounters himself as a youth, sent away from home by his father, but now his sister has come to get him on Christmas Eve. He remembers his hopes for the love and approval of others --hopes buried long ago because they were never realized,

As he watches the scenes of his life pass by, Scrooge sees the many people who actually did reach out to him; people who desperately tried to slow his long slide into self-absorption. He remembers a young woman with whom he had been very much in love, but whose soul he could not reach because he was so preoccupied with his own financial security. She told him, "You fear the world too much." Scrooge is quite shaken by these scenes as they bring him memories of the opportunities he missed, because of risks he would not take.

Soon after the first ghost leaves, the Ghost of Christmas Present arrives and takes Scrooge on a tour of his acquaintance’s homes. It is Christmas morning. He visits the home of his clerk, Bob Cratchit. There, he experiences the warmth and the stoic bravery of this large family as they make the best out of what they are able to afford on the wretched salary Scrooge pays. He hears their expressions of kindness toward him, a kindness he doesn’t deserve. He sees, as well, their worry over the fate of Tiny Tim, their sick, youngest child.

He then visits the home of his nephew, and he realizes that this young man embodies all of the love that Scrooge once received from his sister before

she died. On both of these visits, Scrooge is made to realize that even as hardhearted, as he is now, people have not given up on him.

The Ghost of Christmas Future is the most frightening specter of all. It has no face. It does not speak. It merely points. Scrooge sees the Cratchit family wearing down in their struggle against poverty, living now without Tim who has died for the lack of medical attention they could not afford.

Scrooge also visits the bedchamber of a man who apparently died in his sleep. The maid and the cleaning lady are dividing up his things before the undertaker arrives. Two business associates down below in the street are arguing over whether it would be seemly to have a funeral at all for this man, since no one would attend. Scrooge asks, "But who is this man?" He is taken to an untended grave in an out of the way cemetery. The specter points to the headstone, which bears the name, "Ebenezer Scrooge."

As morning dawns, Scrooge realizes that he has been given a reprieve. He has been given another chance to live his fullest humanity. What has changed Ebenezer Scrooge? It's fair to say that three ghostly visitors in one night would change almost anyone. But we are led to believe that it was what Scrooge saw in those visits that changed him. He saw love struggling to survive within his own life. He saw a chance for that love to be rekindled.

He saw the elemental efforts of other people to keep their basic humanity alive within a dehumanizing culture. He saw that the bottom line for everyone is that nobody lives forever; the journey of life is brief, harder for some than for others and hardest on those who try to make it alone. He saw that the only antidote to a freezing death of the heart is a generosity of spirit toward other people.

This story saved Charles Dickens faltering career, and although he wrote many other Christmas stories he never could create the effect of this one.. Why did it succeed against all odds? I think there are two reasons. The first is that the author knew the darkest regions of the human heart intimately, and he knew that struggle against the death of warmth in the soul is the hardest battle we ever fight.

He knew it because he had been there. Charles Dickens was Ebenezer Scrooge in real life. The story is autobiographical. Dickens was a young man when he wrote it, but he could sense that Scrooge was growing within him and would, in later years, threaten him with Scrooge's emotional isolation.

Dickens had a hard life as a child. Like Bob Cratchit, his father was a clerk. But Cratchit was the father Dickens never had. His own father was irresponsible with both money and love. The family lived hand to mouth, moving every other year or so. John Dickens was imprisoned twice for debt during his

son's childhood. During one of those imprisonments twelve-year-old Charles was taken out of school and put to work in a factory. Both parents freely spent money they didn't have. Neither seems to have understood or loved their eldest child very much.

Dickens once wrote, "I was not beaten or starved; but the wrong that was done to me had no intervals of relenting and was done in systematic, passionless manner. Day after day, week after week, month after month, I was coldly neglected. I wonder, sometimes, when I think of it what they would have done if I had been taken with an illness; whether I should have lain down in my lonely room, and languished through it in my usual solitary way or whether anybody would have helped me out."

The young Scrooge, alone in his room with books his only company, was the young Charles Dickens in reality. His only playmate and the joy of his life was his younger sister Fanny. The character in the story named Fanny comes to fetch Ebenezer Scrooge home on Christmas Eve. In the story, Fanny is the mother of the nephew who tries to cheer him up. Fanny, in the story, is the dear sister whose death Scrooge never got over. Fanny, in real life Dickens own sister, died five years after the "Carol" was written leaving a crippled son.

Unlike Scrooge, Dickens was neither friendless nor single nor childless. But like Scrooge he carried with him such an overriding concern for his own personal security in the world, such an overwhelming need for power over others that he was incapable of emotional intimacy with his wife, or, it would seem, with most of his children.

Unlike Scrooge, Dickens was an extraordinarily generous man with his time and with his money. He supported friends and family heavily, contributed to charities and campaigned for laws to benefit the poor. He never forgot where he came from or how hard his life had been. Like Scrooge, however, his grudge against the world and his inability to forgive those closest to him had become an obsession which kept from him what he most wanted -- the security of being at the center of a genuinely loving family.

I said there were two reasons why "A Christmas Carol" was successful. First, its power comes from the fact that it is the young Charles Dickens seeking a salvation in fiction he never wholly got out of life. The second reason is that many of us recognize the struggles of Ebenezer Scrooge from our own experience. Dickens is offering us a chance to look into his mirror and see ourselves.

Have we been bruised in our growing up? Have we held on to that anger and focused it sometimes on the people who are closest to us. Have we ever-turned aside offers of friendship or kindness out of an unreasonable fear of

entanglement with other people? Have we ever accused the world of doing to us what we are actually doing to ourselves?

Scrooge lives in a prison of his own devising. The doors are shut and sealed with a fear of the world he will not let go. His chains are forged with regrets he cannot release and hurts he cannot forgive. What the ghosts had done was give Scrooge permission to release the locks and the chains and go back to the world that needs the care and love of all of us.

I don't think I have to argue the literary significance of "A Christmas Carol" but you should know that Dickens story shaped the celebration of Christmas both in Great Britain and America. The British and particularly Americans latched onto this story, because it transformed Christmas from a dull ecclesiastical holy day to a celebration of the possibilities of human warmth and hope. And there is something else you should know about Dickens contribution to Christmas.

At about the age of thirty, Dickens himself decided he could not accept the indifference toward the gospel of love, compassion and service to others that he had learned from his parents' Anglican faith. And so he joined a Unitarian chapel. In the interests of full disclosure, at the conclusion of his life he was nominally an Anglican again, but his most beloved work, "A Christmas Carol" was written just after he became a Unitarian, and it reflects his new religious commitment. This is our book.

Early in the story Jacob Marley tells Scrooge "It is required of every (one) that the spirit within should walk abroad among his fellow men and women and travel far and wide." This is a fundamental Unitarian Universalist idea. Life is a great gift that comes to each of us from many sources. Every one of us bears a portion of that gift, and it is our responsibility to walk among our fellow men and women giving whatever portion of strength, encouragement, advocacy or support we have in ourselves to give.

Later in the same section, Scrooge tries to comfort Marley who seems to feel his life has not been well lived. Scrooge says, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob." Marley replies,"Business! Humankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence, were all my businesses. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business."

Unitarian Universalists – all of us – those who believe in heaven and those who do not – believe that the business of humankind, the real sum and end of living, is that we try to do as much as we can to make life easier for those who travel with us. The journey of life is brief; it is harder for some than it is for others, and it is hardest for those who try to make it alone. We have this major responsibility to give each other warmth and company.

Finally, what moves us about this story is that Dickens, like many other Unitarian Universalists of his time and ours, believes there is always another chance for us to lead lives more in line with our best ideals and hopes. In the great economy of life no one's best efforts are lost unless we somehow conspire to lose ourselves. Even then, there is always a way back.

The heart of this story – the heart of the Western Christmas too – is the belief that no matter what darkness lies within us, we can overcome it. This is pure Unitarian Universalist idealism.