

A wreath of relationships in a season of light



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

There was something very beautiful in the scene and the symbolism. A Hanukkah menorah, colored candles ablaze, in the center of a woven wreath of fresh green boughs. Placed on the wreath were three folded paper origami cranes, symbols of peace across cultures. Celebrations intertwined, interconnected as those whose faces shined in the warmth of stories told, reminding us we are each a part of the human family.

This weaving of Hanukkah and Christmas came naturally to me as an interfaith chaplain in jails and shelters. The menorah (candle-holder) was given to me by a Jewish friend; instead of cutting a tree, I found branches to weave into a simple hoop; and my daughter and I folded the tiny birds – silver, red, green, blue – an invitation to gather 'round. In our home, a jail cell or a downtown free dining room, the invitation was the same: come close, come near; you are welcome; join the celebration of life. The wreath created a synagogue, a church, a circle of community, humanity, inclusive of all faiths, and all persons, faith or no faith. And the stories told around those candlelit wreaths made us laugh and cry, think and wonder. Some just stared into the light. Some asked for a sprig of green to scent their cell, their room, their tent.

In the flicker of memories, my young daughter delights in the joy of lighting Christmas and Hanukkah

candles, reading the Nativity narrative, as well as the dramatic story of Judah and his brothers re-taking and re-dedicating the temple in Jerusalem. A fight for freedom; a struggle for identity; ultimately a space for light, a place of warmth for people gathered, grateful to be safe, surrounded in sanctuary once again.

One Hanukkah season, my daughter came home from elementary school to say she told her class about Hanukkah, our wreath and the story we read at home. "The teacher asked if I'm Jewish. Dad ... am I Jewish?" I smiled and sat down with her to explain there are different beliefs and religions. I described to her again the work I did as a minister who was also a chaplain among people of many faiths and some with no religious beliefs at all. She seemed to understand. She certainly does now; she tells me how grateful she is I taught her to look over the whole wreath of religions and make up her own mind.

The word "season" means "a time of sowing." A natural growing process humans participate in. The seeds of Autumn are hidden, stored through Winter, the land rests. We find life where we can and bring it into the light during dark days, illuminated by the fires that warm and kindle our deeper thoughts; we bring color and scent from the natural world around us to brighten our tables; storytelling and festive song lift our voices and our hearts. We find ourselves celebrating our humanity, life, the good gifts of the earth, our families, whether present, apart or absent. To "celebrate" is to honor, so we respect the seasons when we can gather our loved ones or our thoughts.

What of the Christ Child story? That too is woven into the twisted wreath. Greening life, nascent tradition, bearing the awakening perhaps most needed by

churchfolk: He was Jewish. When I came to realize Jesus was not a Christian, I could appreciate him much more, not as a Baby God born during the holiday of Hanukkah, but as a brown-skin boy birthed by a young couple – a family of outsiders shivering in the chill of poverty among persecuted people. A child who would grow to teach compassion while confronting the political and religious powers – the wreath wreckers – of his time. That of course led to his death. Yet, he lives on, as Judah does – a light of freedom, radical hope and active justice. It took a child, born in poverty's manger, to teach a message that could turn the world – even the religious world – upside down: "Blessed are the poor who possess heaven; blessed are the humble who possess the earth."

That wreathed menorah still burns in my memory. We have new traditions in our household now, but the message is the same: gather 'round the light, be warmed, be welcomed. I think of those close circles in the jails and shelters, hand holding hand as we all stood silently staring into the candlelight, speaking our hopes as well as our fears, gently singing familiar tunes that connected us, like a string of lights, to ages past, to the first Hanukkah, first Christmas night.

The only gifts we had to give or receive were present in those circles, bound by the branches in the season of light.

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