

“Festival of Lights”
December 15th, 2019
Rev. Laurel Gray

I’ll confess that I procrastinated writing this sermon by making recycled candles to give as gifts, using the leftover wax from my chalice, while listening to the last chapters of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. But it strikes me that this is, inadvertently, a good metaphor for the story of Hanukkah. A story about an unyielding commitment to hope and freedom and ideals no matter how powerful and terrifying the opponent. An unlikely victory. Finding that there is more light possible, that the flame can burn far longer than imagined.

The funny thing about Hanukkah, or at least the fact that it has been marketed as a kind of Jewish Christmas, chocolate gelt and blue and white tchotchkes sold alongside Santas and snowmen at CVS, the funny thing is that Hanukkah isn’t actually a big deal. At least not as Jewish holidays go. No like Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, not like Passover, and certainly not like Shabbat.

I’ve heard many a rabbi point out that the most important holiday in the Jewish calendar comes not once a year, but once a week. For the most important holiday, the most important holy day is Shabbat. A day for rest and prayer and family. A day to stop all work and simply be in the presence of the love that surrounds us. And that is to be done from sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday every week.

So why is Hanukkah a holiday at all? Unlike Christmas which is certainly biblical, but perhaps less historical, Hanukkah is the only Jewish holiday not accounted for in the Hebrew Bible, and it commemorates a known historical event as I read to you.

Surely, latkes, those fried potato pancakes harkening back to that miraculous abundance of oil, are worth making at least once a year. And so many communities and religions have festivals of light at this darkest time of year. But still, what significance does Hanukkah hold?

Like so many things, I'm sure it holds a different meaning depending on who you ask. And I'm sure many of you have Hanukkah memories of your own. Perhaps you'll share them.

Here's one interpretation.

Several weeks ago I went to a story-telling event that an organization called Fugitive Productions put on - they do Moth-style events in which different people have about five minutes to tell a story, usually around some kind of theme. The theme for the event I attended was "Observation and Imagination" and one of the storytellers, who I think was named Aaron Wolfe, told a story that stuck with me. However, it wasn't recorded and I wasn't taking notes, so this is my imperfect recollection of his story.

He told of driving his young son to get soup dumplings - one of their very favorite foods, and one that, he pointed out, is certainly not kosher. And from the back seat, his son asks, "Dad, why do we celebrate Hanukkah?"

Wolfe then began narrating his frantic-parent internal dialogue to the audience, his mind going in circles trying to answer a question that is at once so simple and so complicated.

He thinks of his Jewish grandfathers and the answers they would give. On one side he has an atheist whose family escaped the Holocaust, who doesn't believe in miracles but insists on the importance of Jewish

identity. And on the other side he has a religiously observant grandfather who would give an entirely different answer, one about God and a temple and a miracle. And Wolfe doesn't know how to explain genocide to his son, nor does he know how he feels about God.

He doesn't have an answer. "Dad, why do we celebrate Hanukkah?" It is such a simple and yet complicated question.

And he describes looking in his rearview mirror at his beautiful son who already knows they're genderqueer, who is wearing their favorite colorful clothes, whose leggings are covered in stars, and finally, in response to the question about why they celebrate Hanukkah, he says to his son:

"Because sometimes being different makes us feel brave."

The story of Hanukkah told in our reading, the story of the Maccabees and King Antioch, who rabbis called "the Wicked," that story is one in which the Maccabees' fierceness and bravery was born from their difference and their commitment to it. It was born from a religious identity that wasn't based on idols or temples or kings, it was simply part of who they were. They were different and they refused to be forced into some conquerer's idea of who they should be.

And in this story, it was that commitment to their religious identity, to their sense of who they were and what they believed that gave them enormous and awe-inspiring power. It was improbable and unforeseen, and yet they mustered a power that broke the violence of those who sought to oppress them.

Because sometimes being different makes us feel brave.

Then, as the story goes, the Maccabees went back to their temple, restored it and rededicated it to their God, but they found they only had enough oil to burn for one night. But they lit it anyway. They had faith enough for that. And they found, miraculously, that the light lasted for eight days.

Our UUA president Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray in her holiday message described this as “the resilient hope of people who lit the lamp knowing there was not enough oil.” She names the importance of rooting ourselves in faith when the fight seems impossible, remembering all the stories of light in this season that ask us to believe that more is possible.

So maybe you’ll be lighting candles as Hanukkah begins next Sunday, or maybe you’ve been lighting Advent candles all month, or putting up Christmas lights, or lighting a chalice at home.

What helps you remember that more is possible?

Maybe you tell the story of Jesus and the manger and that holy guiding star, or maybe it’s the story of the unlikely Maccabees and their undying oil.

Or maybe it’s Harry Potter and the magic that love and loyalty forever surpass the power of evil.

Or maybe you tell the story of our own chalice, of a refugee named Hans Deutsch and a Unitarian minister named Reverend Joy who used the stamp of a flaming chalice as a beacon upon the travel papers of terrified people, their creative audacity, a courage born from faith that made freedom possible for those who were persecuted.

Whatever it is, whatever story reminds you of who you are and how you were made, of the faith that guides you like a star through the night, that

roots you to your history and your unyielding courage, tell the story.
Light the flame. Share your spark.

Because sometimes being different makes us feel brave.

Amen.