

**And the People of the Earth Were Glad: A Solstice and Hanukkah
Homily
December 18, 2011**

Children, beloved Wildflower children, this morning we have created so much lovely, warm glowing light--we've lit our chalice, the menorah, and the yule candle. Even if suddenly it were to grow very dark outside, and the electricity were to go out inside, we'd still have all this beautiful light glowing before us, offering us warmth, and faith that all will be well.

And that is exactly what these different flames represent--faith, even in the darkest of times, that all will be well.

Maybe that's what first drew me to *this* faith--the flaming chalice, the *symbol* of our faith. Every Sunday morning we ignite our faith anew. And as we do, the lay leader recites words that call us once more to hope and to commitment. That is so much what the flaming chalice is about--though not a lot of people know that.

Did you know, in fact, that the flaming chalice came into being during World War II, when Jews and other people being persecuted by the Nazis were fleeing Nazi-occupied European countries? Hans Deutch, an Austrian artist and cartoonist who himself had fled Paris first for Spain, then Portugal, created the symbol at the request of Unitarian minister, the Rev. Charles Joy. Joy was serving as the director of the Unitarian Service Committee, and was in Portugal helping refugees reach safety. When

Deutch arrived, Joy requested he design a unique and remarkable symbol for the Unitarian Service Committee that people would easily recognize. Deutch chose to bring together the chalice--symbol of generosity and communion--with the flame--symbol of sacrifice and courage.

There is a very nice brochure simply called "The Flaming Chalice," written by Rev. Dan Hotchkiss and published by the Unitarian Universalist Association, that offers more of the history behind the chalice. Indeed there is so much history, as well as theology in this simple, beautiful cup holding fire.

And especially at this time of year, when light is less, when we celebrate the miraculous eight-day flame of the Macabees that is at the center of Hanukkah, it's essential we don't just skim over the significance of the light of our own chalice. Yes, it's exciting to be asked to light the chalice, to step forward and bring flame to the wick--particularly after the year at our old place of worship when we were forced to use an electric substitute! How glorious to see true flame again, and in such a strong, steady bronze chalice as we have.

But it's not just about the seeming magic of *creating* the light. It's about the *sustaining* of it as well. The perseverance of the flame. For if we pay attention to it, and if the message is deserving of it, the words spoken from this spot, this pulpit, are held by the flame. The flame carries in it the message of compassion, love, justice, faith, sacrifice. And *these* are the

things that should light our way, that should warm us as we journey through life.

But of course, at the end of each service, we need to extinguish the chalice, snuff the flame out. We even box up the chalice and put it back in the storage room when the service is over. That's kind of sad, isn't it? Because it means for the next seven days, until we gather again, that flame of love and compassion, justice, courage and sacrifice, isn't burning.

So what do you think we need to do? Well, some things we can do include lighting other, smaller chalices in our weekday meetings, and maybe even in our own homes at meal time, or wearing chalice jewelry, as I wear this ring, or others wear pendants or earrings. (How many of you have some kind of chalice jewelry or actual chalices at home?) I even know a few people who don flaming chalice tattoos!

But just as much as we have the opportunity to carry the flaming chalice on the *outside*, we need also to carry that light right *inside* our own selves! Of course, I don't mean we literally swallow fire or anything. I can't even handle spicy food, so there's no way I'm going to be able to swallow fire. But, try this. Imagine putting your hands up to a fire as if to get them warm. You go something like this. Now imagine you can take the warmth and light of that fire, and hold it in your hands like a ball, like this. Now imagine taking that light you're holding in your hands and putting it right up to your heart. And as you keep it there, say to yourself something like, "In

my heart, I hold love and compassion.” “In my heart, I hold courage and faith.” It feels good, doesn’t it? And that’s our job, really, to hold these values in our hearts all throughout our days, even when we don’t have the actual chalice in front of us to remind us.

Similarly, even when the sun is only briefly in the sky and the nights are long, we need not put out the light of our own hope. Cradled in the darkness, we know that, just as the stars fill the sky, light fills our hearts. And just as we know that the chalice will be lit the next Sunday, in the winter we have faith the sun will begin to linger in the sky a little longer, and that spring will come again.

But remember. It’s not about faith alone. While we are at the mercy of the cycles of nature, and need to practice patience in the shortest days, as we celebrate Hanukkah along with the winter solstice, it is important to remember that sometimes we must *struggle* for the return of light in our lives. As it commemorates the rededication of the Jewish temple that had been captured and nearly destroyed by oppressors, Hanukkah is a holy time to remember justice and sacrifice as well as faith. The miracle of the menorah is that only one day’s worth of lamp oil had remained pure after the struggle, but as a sign of blessing upon the people who had fought for their religious freedom, the flame lasted for eight days.

Here in Austin, Texas, here at Wildflower Church, our religious struggles are not as extreme as they are for those whose very religious

homes are taken over and violated by outsiders. Nor, with our spot on the earth and our street lamps and city lights shining into the night, are our winters as dark or threatening as they may be for those living in colder climates. Still, let us never take for granted the power and the beauty of both darkness and light. For both are teachers to us, both lead us into mystery and miracles. So in this season of light in darkness, let us be grateful for the light of the yule candle, the light of the menorah, and the light of our own chalice. And always, in winter and summer, autumn and spring, in the mornings and at night and all the hours in between, let us remember the light that shines within our own hearts.

Amen.