

Quarterly Yoke Letter

XLVIII

December, 2006

Number 4

Renewing The Spirit...Renewing The Mind...

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Dear Friends,

I first visited London and The Cheshire Cheese pub in 1982 with Elton Trueblood. Each time that I have returned, I always find time to visit it again. The Cheshire Cheese is an historic pub just off of Fleet Street, and just down the hill from St. Paul's Cathedral. It was at The Cheshire Cheese that Samuel Johnson and Charles Dickens would sit for hours, keeping their guests and fellow Londoners entranced in conversation. As one who loves the writing of both Johnson and Dickens, it is always an uplifting experience to sit where they once sat, and to imagine each of them sharing their gift of words with all who would listen.

Throughout this Christmas Season, I have thought often about those experiences in The Cheshire Cheese as we have been treated with Charles Dickens' most famous work in movie version, "A Christmas Carol." For those of you familiar with the work of Dickens, you know that at the heart of much of his thought and writing there was an empathy for the suffering and oppressed of the world. It was this compassion for humanity, rooted in his own childhood experience of poverty that motivated so much of his writing. From the writing of "A Christmas Carol," released in December of 1843, until his death in June of 1870, Dickens' vision of a society redeemed through love and generosity filled all of his works. If anyone would question the modern popularity of "A Christmas Carol," just look at your T.V. listings. Three different versions of this classic have been shown frequently throughout the season! It is, indeed, Dickens' most popular work.

But what makes this story so popular? What is it that makes it so memorable and such a seasonal favorite, so much so that Hollywood releases a new version of the classic about every two years? Is it because of its depiction of human misery that appeals to our kinder nature? I don't believe so. Is it because of its portrayal of how the cheer of the Christmas Season can cause us to live above our troubles, and like Scrooge's nephew, Fred, find a reason to be merry and optimistic? Again, I don't think that is it. The truth about Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," and what I believe has made it such a classic, is that *it is an expression of hope*. And it is an expression of hope because the story is centered in the fact that Ebenezer Scrooge was not just comforted by the message of Christmas, nor was he just educated by the message of Christmas. No, Ebenezer Scrooge was *transformed* by the message of Christmas. He was changed...radically changed! Here was one who was confronted with his own selfishness, and he experienced a remarkable, dramatic turn about in his attitudes, his ideas and his behavior. How did such a turn about happen? What were the stages that Scrooge went through to finally reach that place of redemption? I believe that there were at least three:

First is recognizing that we are in a stage of estrangement, or quite simply the condition of being separated from God. Such estrangement is not generally recognized. Early on in "A Christmas Carol," Scrooge did not think of himself as estranged from God, as much as Bob Cratchit and nephew Fred tried to show him his misdirected and detrimental ways.

And we don't either. If we could be totally honest with ourselves, I believe that we would have to admit that there is a bit of old Scrooge in each of us...one who trusts in things more than God...one who seeks after power rather than servant hood...one who goes along unthinkingly with many of the structures of society that demean the poor and shame the outcast. And although we would never admit it openly, a part of us secretly agrees with Ebenezer when he asserted, "It is enough for a person to understand his own business, and not to interfere with the business of others. Mine occupies me constantly."

A second stage is what can be called chaos and confrontation. Such chaos can have gentle beginnings, such as an inner tug deep within our souls that awakens us to the realization that the life we are now living is not fulfilling. Chaos can begin in more dramatic ways as well—the death of a loved one, divorce, illness, the loss of a job or academic failure. Whatever the impetus, chaos and confrontation is uncomfortable. It moves us out

of familiar patterns and known ways. It causes us to re-evaluate what is important, how our lives are being lived; and, if we heed the signs, sets us on a journey of seeking more of what is missing.

For Ebenezer Scrooge, the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future were the bearers of chaos and confrontation. Into the well-established patterns of our lives, chaos will come, and out of such chaos resides the possibility of transformation. Whatever else we thought the meaning of life was before we encountered chaos, or chaos encountered us, we can come to know something completely different about life as our quest to know God and be known by God becomes central and primary. Like Scrooge, what we used to make fun of we will find ourselves doing, and what we used to do we will now walk away from...

The third and final stage of the redemption through which Scrooge passed was transformation. The amazing thing is that human personality can be changed, can be altered, and can be redirected. It may seem that the lines of our lives are drawn and that there is no way to change them. Scrooge's question is one we all ask as he speaks to the third spirit... "Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they the shadows of the things that may be only? Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge, "but if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus what you show me!" The scene shifts with Scrooge looking down at his own grave... "The spirit was immovable as ever. Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, Ebenezer Scrooge. 'Am I the man who lay upon the bed?,' he cried. The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again. 'Spirit' he cried, tight clutching at its robe, 'hear me! *I am not the man I was.* I will not be the man I must have been but for these visions. Why show me this if I am past all hope? Good spirit, your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me by an altered life.'"

Redemption brings judgment as well as salvation. To be redeemed involves a process of recognizing our estrangement from God; experiencing the chaos and confrontation which comes with the recognition of such estrangement. And finally, redemption leads to transformation. And what did that transformation look like for Scrooge? He was made into a NEW person by the enlargement of his faith...

One of the most meaningful books to be published this year is *Big Christianity* by my friend and fellow Yokefellow, Jan Linn. Jan writes about such an enlarged faith in the following way...*A bigger Christianity does not exploit fear. It seeks to overcome it with an ethic of nonjudgmental love, love without partitions or conditions. It offers people an open circle of faith, the bonds of which are made stronger as the circle enlarges. It is a faith that can be fully in the world without being of it. It knows the difference between appeasement and reconciliation, flexibility and unfaithfulness, principle and pride. A Bigger Christianity is never so big as to stand for nothing, nor ever so small as to stand in the way of what God is doing in the world. "Bigger" is not usually better, but when it comes to faith, it is...Bigger Christianity...is a faith that lives to love and is willing to risk everything in its service...*

The faith of the transformed Scrooge was *bigger*. It moved him to be "better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew..."

The good news of Christmas and "A Christmas Carol" is that we can be changed into the kinds of persons whose *bigger faith* can make us as good a friend, as good an employer or employee, as good a neighbor, as good a human being as the community in which we live or any other community in the world has ever experienced.

The words on the greeting card are true... "Christmas is a journey that the heart makes every year." To be redeemed and transformed is an experience of the heart. May we open our hearts, and follow our hearts, and may we honor Christmas in our hearts, keeping it all the year through...

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year,

James R. Newby

