

Celebrate Kwanzaa

Well, it's December 29th. We've run out of Advent Sundays but we aren't quite to the new year. I wanted to continue the inter-faith kind of theme we've had for December so I was guided to Kwanzaa. Technically, Kwanzaa isn't faith based but it is culture based. So what culture and why do we have Kwanzaa, what does it mean and why should anyone at Unity of Lehigh Valley care about it?

You know how I keep talking about how the Universe contributes to my sermons? Well, when the Universe stops contributing, I'll stop talking about it. I was randomly searching for something to watch on Netflix one night and for some reason clicked on a movie titled, "Holiday in the Wild." **Not** filmed in Philadelphia, it was filmed in Zambia. A movie much more about elephant conservation than Christmas, it was really interesting to watch it and notice little things. Like that the film begins with modern cities in Zambia, a modern airport and luxury hotel. Local people were seen with ordinary clothes, although many had the African fabric and men and women often wore more loose fitting than Western styles. The roles of people who worked at the Elephant nursery were treated with respect and African people were seen as intelligent and hard-working and compassionate.

Now I want you to reflect on the ways the dominant, white European culture in the United States typically describes what I will call, "original people". How have you heard Native Americans described? How did whites describe the individuals brought to this country from Africa and forced into slavery? Mostly I think of the word, "savages". Or heathens or uncivilized or barbarian or primitive. It is a practice of oppression to portray the oppressed group as somehow less than the dominant group and therefore, oppression is not a big deal because it's not like **they** are really like **us**. The disparity in value allows humanity to inflict great injury on fellow humans.

As we've moved through the Advent season we have touched on ways other festivities have commonality with the Christian celebration of the nativity of Jesus, or Christmas. There are candles and a focus on light in the time of darkness. There is a sense of community, family time and coming together with those we care about. There are gifts to give and receive, special foods to share and rituals that comfort us. We look at the different traditions not because most of us are Jewish or pagan or African-American, but because information is powerful and information about how we can connect in common ground transforms distrust and animosity into community.

We can transform a label of “non-believer” into a simple knowing that some people believe differently than we do. Different is just different, not better, not worse. Kwanzaa is not a celebration of specific spiritual beliefs but rather a celebration of culture that raises up values and respect for ancestors for African-Americans.

Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga. Dr. Karenga was born Ronald McKinley Everett on a poultry farm in Parsonsburg, Maryland on July 14, 1941. He was the seventh son and fourteenth child of a Baptist minister. Ronald Everette would eventually change his name 20 years later to Maulana Karenga which translates as “Master Teacher”. He is a professor of African studies at the University of California in Long Beach. In creating the celebration following Christmas and often Hanukkah, his goal was to “give Blacks an alternative to the existing holiday and give Blacks an opportunity to celebrate themselves and history, rather than simply imitate the practice of the dominant society.” In separating it from Christmas by a day, he does allow for the celebration of both holidays for those who participate in faith celebrations.

The name Kwanzaa comes from a phrase of Swahili origin, “Matunda Ya Kwanza”, and translates as “First Fruits of the Harvest”. The holiday is actually based on African agricultural rites and communal activities and resembles our Thanksgiving and the Yam festival in Ghana and Nigeria. A primary perspective of the holiday is to cause those of African descent to look back to their cultural roots as a source of celebration. Using the words we discussed at the beginning, those of African descent have not been encouraged to believe in the intelligence, moral values or history of their ancestors.

My maternal grandfather’s maternal grandfather was Thomas Hepburn. According to Thomas’ youngest daughter, my aunt Cecilia, he was a gardener for the Scottish poet Robbie Burns. He was deported from Scotland for refusing to bow to the Queen’s carriage. Arriving in the United States during the Civil War, he fought for the North but fell in love and married a woman in Virginia. This is part of my heritage and because I’m white, I know it and can trace it. How many of us in this room know stories about ancestors and who first came to this country and from where? However, if our ancestors are original people, either in this country or from Africa, there may not be records. Or there are bills of sale rather than census records. Kwanzaa acknowledges the history and culture that may have been erased by dominance.

So what values or principles does Kwanzaa celebrate? The seven principles of Kwanzaa utilize Kiswahili words: unity (umoya), self-determination (kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (ujima), cooperative economics (ujamaa), purpose (nia), creativity (kuumba), and faith (imani). Each of the seven candles signify the principles. There are three red, three green and one black candle. The colors are on the flags of independence in African nations. Also, the color black represents the people; red represents the blood that unites them and the blood shed during slavery and the civil rights movement; and green represents the lush lands in Africa.

As they move through the nights of Kwanzaa from December 26th to January 1st, the gatherings discuss the principles.

Umoja (Unity): maintaining unity as a family, community and race of people.

Kujichagulia (Self-Determination): defining, naming and creating and speaking for ourselves.

Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility): building and maintaining our community--solving problems together.

Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics): building and maintaining retail stores and other businesses and to profit from these ventures.

Nia (Purpose): work collectively to build communities that will restore the greatness of African people.

Kuumba (Creativity): to find new, innovative ways to leave communities of African descent in more beautiful and beneficial ways than the community inherited.

Imani (Faith): the belief in God, family, heritage, leaders and others that will lead to the blessings of Africans around the world.

“Habari gani?” is a traditional Swahili greeting meaning “What is the news?”, and the response is each of the principles, depending on which day of Kwanzaa it is. Or you can just say, “Happy Kwanzaa”.

For me, as a person of white privilege and an advocate for a level playing field for all and as a faith leader, the celebration of Kwanzaa is a time to acknowledge fellow Americans who for many generations lost touch with their history and heritage through intentional acts by others.

Acknowledging the celebration of Kwanzaa, for me, is an act of healing divisions and seeing again, common ground among all who desire peace and community. I believe that being proud of who you are is not divisive. Believing who you are is better than others is divisive. Kwanzaa is a time to allow an honoring of African heritage for those Americans it applies to and the practice of being your best self. It is trusting each of our best selves to ultimately work for the common good. If we truly are inclusive, then our common good will not be to the detriment of any of our planetary family. Habari Gani!