

The Christmas Spirit
Rev. Elizabeth Stevens
Christmas Eve 2005
7:00 pm service

Reading: “A Cautionary Christmas Tale” by Frank Rivas

My little sister, Renee, was ten years younger than I. When she was in kindergarten, I considered her to be the most obnoxious child on this planet.

So I decided to get her a lump of coal for Christmas. I know that people generally consider it Santa's responsibility to give lumps of coal to bad little boys and girls, but I had learned over the years not to trust Santa's judgment. I'd seen it over and over again; the old man went easy on little kids.

So the responsibility fell to me. I searched the yellow pages, went to the nearest coal yard, picked out an exceptionally large chunk, wrapped it nicely in a box with a bow and placed it under the Christmas tree.

Our family encouraged recipients to lift, shake, and guess at the contents as soon as a gift was under the tree. Renee was fascinated. What gift could weigh so much?

By our Christmas morning tradition, the gifts were sorted into five piles; then one at a time, going around the circle as many times as necessary, we opened our gifts for everyone to see.

Renee opened mine first. As she unwrapped ribbon, paper and box, her excitement grew. My excitement grew too; the moment of reckoning was at hand. From her first glance at the coal she loved it. She screamed with delight and hugged me profusely.

How was I to know that only a week earlier, in her kindergarten class, she had learned to grow colorful crystals on coal. How was I to know that this would be her favorite gift?

There's a moral to this story, my friends. Watch out for this season. There's a spirit in the air that can turn even the most vindictive thoughts into good deeds.

Homily: Christmas Spirit

What is the “Christmas Spirit” we hear so much about?
Is it, perhaps, peppermint schnapps?

I’ll tell you what it’s not: greed.
Though there’s plenty of that around at Christmas time, too.

No, the Christmas Spirit is about the ability to find unexpected gifts
In unlikely places.
It’s about finding light in the darkness,
Finding warmth in the cold,
Finding love and peace not in the getting
But in the giving.

I have been taking our puppy, Maddy, out for her pre-bedtime walk
These past few months,
And we walk with an abundance of Christmas spirit.

The gifts that she finds are
Moldy paper bags,
Discarded plastic bottles,
Leaves, rocks, wood chips...
She’s not picky, and every new discovery
Sets her little furry body to wiggling and wagging.

Once she found some chicken bones...Hallelujah!
But her mean old mommy had to take them away,
Because they’re a choking hazard.

Twice I was moved to tears for some reason
As she tenderly picked up a discarded glove
And carried it for a while,
Trotting along,
Setting it down only when something new captured her attention.

Meanwhile, the gifts that I have found are different.
The beautiful and ghostly sight
Of moonlight reflected on the slopes of the Olympics.
The crunch of frosty grass under my feet.
Christmas lights.
Stillness.
My favorite constellation: Orion,
The three stars across his belt
So easily recognizable.
Here, back East, even in Russia...

Orion comes out in winter
And hides in the summer
A surer sign of the season than temperature or weather.

It's the Christmas spirit that enables us
To experience all of these simple things
As wonderful gifts,
Worthy of wonder and awe
And that warm, spacious feeling
In our respective chests.

The Christmas spirit can move in us at any time,
But it is especially close as the holiday approaches,
Stories and memories and songs and sappy movies reminding us
To be grateful and aware...
To invite love and peace into our hearts
And lives
And to be our best divine selves,
Even if only for a time.

We've all heard the story of the Christmas Eve during World War II
When opposing forces lay down their arms
And came out of their trenches,
Singing Christmas carols together,
In different languages,
And putting arms around one another
Acknowledging that we are all more alike than different,
More connected than we know.

Christmas tells us we have the capacity
Through our bond with one another and with life itself
To live into our hope.
The effect of this unleashed Christmas Spirit is conveyed in a letter
Written nearly 40 years ago by a William Lederer of Honolulu.
It was addressed to Admiral David McDonald,
Chief of Naval Operations, Washington, DC.

It reads:

Dear Admiral McDonald,

This letter is a year late.

Nevertheless, it is important that you receive it. Eighteen people asked me to write to you.

Last year at Christmas time my wife, three boys and I were in France,
On our way from Paris to Nice.

For five wretched days EVERYTHING had gone wrong.
On Christmas Eve, when we checked into a dingy hotel – in Nice,
There was no Christmas spirit in our hearts.
It was raining and cold when we went out to eat.
We found a drab little joint shoddily decorated for the holiday.
It smelled greasy.

Only five tables in the restaurant were occupied.
There were two German couples, two French families,
And an American sailor, by himself in the corner.
A piano player listlessly played Christmas music.
I was too stubborn and too tired and too miserable to leave.
I looked around and noticed
That the other customers were eating in stony silence.
The only person who seemed happy was the American sailor.

While eating, he was writing a letter, and a half-smile lighted his face.

My wife ordered our meal in French.

The waiter brought us the wrong thing.
I got angry with my wife. She began to cry.
The boys defended her, and I felt even worse.
Then, at the table with the French family on our left,
The father slapped one of his children for some minor infraction,
And the boy began to cry.

On our right the German wife began berating her husband.

All of us were interrupted by an unpleasant blast of cold air.

Through the front door came in an old French flower woman.

She wore a dripping, tattered overcoat
And shuffled in old wet, rundown shoes.
Carrying her basket of flowers, she went from one table to the other.
“Flowers, monsieur? Only one franc.”

No one bought any.

Wearily she sat down at a table between the sailor and us.

To the waiter she said,
“A bowl of soup. I haven’t sold a flower all afternoon.”
To the piano player she said hoarsely,
“Can you imagine, Joseph, soup on Christmas Eve?”
He pointed to his empty “tipping plate.”

The young sailor finished his meal and got up to leave.

Putting on his coat, he walked over to the flower woman's table.
"Happy Christmas," he said, smiling and picking out two corsages.

"How much are they?"

"Two francs, monsieur."

Pressing one of the small corsages flat,
He put it into the letter he had written
Then handed the woman a 20-franc note.

"I don't have change, monsieur," she said. "I'll get some from the waiter."

"No, ma'am," said the sailor, leaning over and kissing the ancient cheek.

"This is my Christmas present to you."

Straightening up, he came to our table,
Holding the other corsage in front of him.
"Sir," he said to me,
"may I have permission to present these flowers
To your beautiful daughter?"

In one quick motion he gave my wife the corsage,
Wished us a Merry Christmas and departed.

Everyone had stopped eating. Everyone had been watching the sailor.
The restaurant was silent.

Then, Christmas erupted throughout the restaurant.
The old flower woman jumped up, waving the 20-franc note.
Hobbling to the middle of the floor
She did a merry jig and shouted to the piano player,
"Joseph, my Christmas present! You shall have half so you can have a feast too!"
The piano player began to belt out *Good King Wenceslaus*
Beating the keys with magic hands, nodding his head in rhythm.
My wife waved her corsage in time to the music.
She was radiant.

The tears had left her eyes, and the corners of her mouth turned up in laughter.
She began to sing, and our three sons joined her,
Bellowing the song with uninhibited enthusiasm.

Gut! Gut! Shouted the Germans.
They jumped on their chairs and began singing the words in German.
The waiter embraced the flower woman.
Waving their arms, they sang in French.
The Frenchman who had slapped the boy
Tapped the rhythm with his fork on a bottle.
The lad climbed on his lap, singing in a youthful soprano.
The Germans ordered wine for everyone
And delivered it themselves,

Hugging the other customers and bawling Christmas greetings.
One of the French families called for champagne
And made the rounds, kissing each one of us on both cheeks.
The owner of the restaurant started “The First Noel”
And we all joined in,
Half of us crying.
People crowded in from the street
Until many customers were standing
And the walls shook as hands and feet kept time to the yuletide carols.

A few hours earlier 18 persons
Had been spending a miserable evening in a shoddy restaurant.
It ended up being the happiest,
The very best Christmas Eve they had ever experienced.

This, Admiral McDonald, is what I am writing you about.

As the top man in the Navy,
You should know about the very special gift that the U.S. Navy
Gave to my family, to me and to the other people in that French restaurant.

Because your young sailor had Christmas spirit in his soul,
He released the love and joy
That had been smothered within us by anger and disappointment.
He gave us Christmas.

To you sir, I say thank you so much.
Merry Christmas. [signed] Bill Lederer¹

The Christmas Spirit is the ability to find unexpected gifts
In unlikely places.
The gift of light in the darkness--
Because even though the light of a single candle is small
And fragile,
It can be passed from person to person
Sparkling and sparkling
And allowing us to see the divine in one another's eyes.

The gift of warmth in the cold--
Because as we gather together
the heat from our very bodies
reminds us we are not alone.

The gift of love and peace—

¹ Originally from the Saturday Evening post, passed on in an article by the Rev. Brandoch Lovely in First Days Record, 2/90, passed on to me by the Rev. Art Vaeni with a few of his words of introduction.

Because the stories we tell
And the time we spend together remind us that
love and peace are not something to ask for,
But something we choose to give.

May our hearts fill like vessels
With the Christmas spirit,
Until we are overflowing
With hope and joy and love and peace.

So be it, and so may it be.