

One Family Full of Light

Christmas Eve 2007

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“The church buildings and budgets came *later*,” writes a Presbyterian minister and author named Fred Buechner. “The forms of church government, the priests and pastors, Baptists and Protestants. The Sunday services with everybody in their best clothes, the Sunday Schools and choirs *all came later*. So did the Bible study groups and rummage sales. So did the preachers ... the ones who make you sick to your stomach with phoniness ... and the ones through whose words every once in a while the Word itself touches your heart. *They all came later.*”

Having offered this perspective, brother Buechner goes on to make a prophetically bold sounding statement, saying, “Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash all that away – the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. *Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place.*” (Buechner, Telling Secrets in the Dark, pp. 152-153)

The institution that is the Church can seem so complicated. So many different branches have grown up from the time of the blessed birth in Bethlehem so long ago. Each branch, each tradition, has its own teachings about such matters as the authority of the Bible, what constitutes a real sacrament and who is eligible to receive it, and how exactly a person is to receive salvation. Countless hours of rhetorical gymnastics in writing and in speech have been dedicated to defending the various traditions. And oh how the Lord our God knows, there have been way too many condemnations in the name of Christ spat across the face of history. Yes, this institution that is the Church can seem so complicated. And it seems to me *complication* can -- and perhaps more and more commonly does -- lead to lack of *participation*.

While I don't know about *all* of that breaking down so as to go back to the beginning so boldly suggested by Fred Buechner ... I do believe and joyfully agree that we Christians indeed need to have a stronger sense of just being with each other and with Christ. Less focus on the particulars of participation that can lead to complication and condemnation, and more faithful focus on sharing our one, true, spiritually pulsing, honestly loving common heart. This heart, embodied in the diverse community of believers, beats with the eternal love and beauty of God physically born to the world back at the beginning in Bethlehem.

So we soulfully sit here this evening one with each other. What a lovely scene. We are in a celebratory, holy mood. We are gathered around a manger of remembrance as one family full of Light. This Light shines across the beauty of this sanctuary and upon the beauty of our faces and faithful hearts as, together, we glorify God in Scripture, in song, in prayer. It is the love light of our Savior, Jesus.

And I trust with strong faith and hope that our illuminated gathering around our one true and common hearth of hope will extend beyond the doorways of this historic sanctuary. For along with our celebrating the birth of the Savior through Scripture, song and prayer on this blessed night, I believe we need to celebrate through *service* everyday.

Service in the name of Emmanuel, of God with us, is not busywork. It's not about duties dictated by any institution or by feelings such as guilt. Nor is it just another morally good feeling volunteer opportunity. It is always first and foremost a proactive expression of our living in the love light of our Savior, Jesus. This service is the embodiment of our abiding love for God, of our gratitude for what God has done on our behalf to very personally birth new life within us, and of our love for ourselves and all children of God. This service is the sacred pulse of every Christian congregation. And Christmas, I feel more than any other time of year, reminds us to call one another to be a community that gathers to celebrate our common commitment to this sacred service in all of its manifestations. We aren't to be broken down beacons of the love light born to us in Bethlehem; we are to be bright, guiding stars helping our Savior pierce and transform darkness everywhere it is found in the world.

It was in the spirit of sacred service that Mary treasured the news of the magnificent miracle that had overshadowed her young, humble, peasant life. It was in the spirit of sacred service that Joseph did not turn away from his betrothed upon the embarrassing news of her being with child. It was in the spirit of sacred service that socially outcast shepherds and royal kings alike stopped what they were doing and followed a strange yet clearly holy star. It was in the spirit of sacred service that an innkeeper with no rooms left to give believed it best to at least grant space in a cattle cave for the beleaguered, bourgeoning-bellied teenager and her anxious fiancée.

Participation in the living love of the Lord doesn't always require a tremendous amount of sacrifice. That's always welcome and appreciated, of course, especially in the form of mission trips and congregational leadership. But sometimes, it's really as simple as faithfully knowing when to step off the sidewalk.

I'm referring here to a story about Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was once asked by another prominent clergyman why he became an Anglican priest. It seems that growing up black during Apartheid in South Africa, he was expected from the moment he could walk to step off of a sidewalk and into the gutter if a white man was traveling toward him in the opposite direction. This was gesture of respect also known as knowing one's place in that society.

Then one day, to quote the Archbishop, "when I was just a little boy, my mother and I were walking down the street when a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to *her!*"

This status reversal so shocked and illuminated his young heart that he immediately and excitedly asked his mother why that particular white man did it. She replied, "He's an Anglican priest. He's a man of God. That's why he did it." Bishop Tutu knew from that day forward he wanted to be such a person.

That one small act of service spread an immense span of Christ's light. It was a revolutionary step that heralded a new dawn in the life of that one young child suffering from the darkness of sinful injustice.

This is what our God has done for all of us in the birth of Jesus. God has met us directly where we are, personally and uniquely addressed our most inner and worldly woes, and dawned a new reality of real love for us to live into. In the sacred spirit of our Savior, we respond by going out and doing likewise in all sorts of ways, by being vessels of this illuminating grace in the lives of others. Together, we can really dazzle the world if we set our faithful hearts to do so! We are indeed, one family full of light!

The commercialism of Christmas gets packed away every year (anyone seen Valentines' Day decorations in your local stores yet? Give it a day or two!). But for the Church, across all its blessed branches and among all of its blessed saints, the bold, brilliant message of God with us is a daily reminder of who and how we are to be together. So I pray for you to feel illuminated every single day by our Savior's blessing of true life and light. May you be grateful in the glow of it and may we *all* steadfastly shine on. Amen.