

Homily for Christmas, 2017

It is generally understood that St. Francis of Assisi was the first to create nativity scenes - with live animals - as a way to teach the people about Luke's birth story of Jesus. All these centuries later, the Christmas nativity scene remains a wonderful gift for all of us to reflect upon in this holy season. For as far back as I can remember my mom would set up the scene of small figurines in our living room a week or two before Christmas. She would put evergreens behind and around it and even bought that spray-can snow to cover the barn, a little on the animals and the evergreens. As children, the nativity helped bring the story alive for my brothers and me; and in our older years it became a sort of meditation for us all.

Perhaps some of you got to St. Teresa School to see the display of some 75 nativity scenes, from various countries and cultures and decades, each with something wonderfully unique. It was set up in the multi-purpose room of the school for several days. The mom who organized the whole thing, told me this story of what happened the first day. As the first graders were going through the display someone noticed that, in one of the scenes, the baby Jesus was missing. So the mom who begged and borrowed the nativity sets from school families and friends panicked and started looking about and wondering where it went. She enlisted some of the other parents and a few kids to help look, but baby Jesus was nowhere to be found. One of the first graders could see the consternation of the mom and she spoke up, "Don't worry, Mrs. Schroder, Jesus isn't missing, he is right here," pointing to her heart.

That child got it, right? All the trappings of this Christmas Season, the food, the music, the decorations, the lights, even the gathering of family and friends, is to point us to something more. I've heard a few comment this year that people seem to be a little kinder, a little less likely to pass judgment, a little more generous because it's Christmas. Maybe it seems more this year because it feels like people became more harsh with one another the rest of the year. The gift of Christmas comes with a challenge too. Remember getting a Christmas present that takes work? Like the bicycle you needed to put together or the BBQ you needed to construct or just about anything mechanical or electrical you got for your kids? You spend the rest of the day trying to put it together or figure it out - maybe the rest of the week.

The *real* gift of Christmas, of the birth of Jesus, takes work to unwrap and fully put to use - more than a week or a time of year, but your whole life. I heard about one guy recently who I think is doing some nice unwrapping of the gift. He owns several season tickets to the Dallas Cowboys games. He found himself getting angry over the kneeling and argument at football games so he decided to do something positive. He gives away his tickets to teenage boys and a police officer and he invites them to a tailgate party before the game to meet each other and talk. He finds that it helps, perhaps in some small way, to break down the fear and ignorance that can be a basis for racism. It takes work and risk but I think he's unwrapping the gift of Christmas that way, whether he knows it or not.

"Don't worry Mrs. Schroder, Jesus isn't missing, he's right here." It turned out that the little figurine of the baby Jesus wasn't lost - just misplaced in the scene. We can misplace him too, or keep him wrapped up in swaddling clothes. So we just have to keep unwrapping the gift - day to day, month to month, year to year. *"For a child is born to us, a son is given us; they name him Wonder-Counselor, Prince of Peace."*

"Gloria, in excelsis Deo."

Merry Christmas!