

“My Father’s Gift” Rev. Jim Manley Nov. 30, 2008 San Dimas
Community Church, UCC Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-18 Mark 13:32-37

In the Christmas seasons of my youth, the old Federated Church of Reno, Nevada, stood at the corner of Fifth and Virginia Streets, five blocks north from the glitter of the gambling houses.

I loved the wide stone steps leading up to the great sanctuary doors. I knew every closet and corner of the proud old building.

My favorite place was the basement. It included the kitchen with its massive black iron stove where the Women’s Guild cooked up so many wonderful dinners; and off the main fellowship room was the ancient furnace which blew up one Sunday morning. Upstairs in the sanctuary smoke belched out of the register under the pulpit, just as my father was concluding his sermon in which he had denounced the notion of a fire and brimstone hell. That old church was trying to tell him something!

But I loved the basement best for the potluck dinners we held there. And on the night of my father’s special gift to me, the congregation had gathered for a Christmas eve supper.

They had come through the snow and slush which was rapidly freezing in the streets, but inside they found the furnace was working well once more. On the high transoms of the basement, little trickles of moisture ran down the windowpanes.

The serving tables were laden with home-baked casseroles and holiday treats of great variety. I always tried every dish, and made sure my mother’s contribution was completely consumed. I had my family loyalties, and believed that an unemptied casserole reflected poorly on the provider

We had all gone through the line, and were well along with dinner when the street door blew open. Into the light lurched a man. An Indian--Washoe or Paiute. He appeared to be drunk on his feet. His face bore the agony of cold and misery and humiliation.

The room hushed silent. Time froze as I sat with the others, immobilized by this great and unexpected intrusion.

He raised his hands and formed a cross like the one high on our steeple outside in the wind and snow. Then he crumpled.

Before he hit the floor, my father caught him. How he had rushed to him from across the room, I do not know.

My father held him, almost cradled him, oblivious to the congregation now gathering around. And in that moment I knew that all the carols and festivities of the season pointed to something very, very real. My father embodied that Love which is Christmas, and which knows no limitations.

We were long since home that night when my father arrived, having made arrangements, even on a Christmas eve, for the extended care and recovery of a man whom nobody had wanted.

During this Advent season, as we prepare for the coming of Christ in our hearts, may we remember Jesus' words which were a favorite of my father's, and to which Hal Jackson spoke so eloquently last Sunday:

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me....For as you cared for the weakest and the neediest of these in my family you cared for me.” (Matt. 25: 35f.)

On that Christmas morning I would unwrap a football, some hockey skates and other presents. But looking back I know that the best gift of all that year had already been given.

May we each find ways to give such merciful gifts of love and care to others during this Advent season.