

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I know many of you here this morning are trying to get an early start on a very busy day, and I will see later at the 5:00 o'clock Christmas Eve Mass at the Parish Center or at 8:00 o'clock at St. Malachy's or at Midnight back here in the Church. Most of you will be back here tomorrow at 8:00 A.M. for Mass on Christmas Day. So, I will be very brief this morning. But there's a story I have to tell which, perhaps, you have heard or seen elsewhere. Every time I read it, it makes me tear up.

It's the story of a family out Christmas shopping who decided to stop for lunch at a diner near the Mall. The Mother placed two-year old Erik in a highchair, as she and her husband perused the menu. Suddenly Erik squealed with glee, and said, "Hi," giggling and chuckling as he looked across the aisle.

His Mother followed the direction of Erik's gaze to learn what had delighted her son. Her eyes met a home-less looking, unkempt old man just across from their table. With his hands waving at Erik, the man said, "Hello, Baby...you're such a big boy". The parents quickly ordered their meal and, as they waited, Erik and the old man continued to commune with each other. By the time their food arrived, the old man was playing "Peek-a-boo" with Erik. By now, others in the restaurant were staring at the spectacle. The parents ate quickly, tried to feed Erik who was still enthralled with the derelict.

As soon as they finished their meal, the Father quickly paid the check, told his wife he would get the car and she could meet him out front. The old man sat right where she would have to pass by. She quietly prayed, "Lord, let me get out of here before this old drunk speaks to me or Erik.

As she stepped into the aisle, lifting Erik from his high chair, he leaned over her arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position. Before the Mom could stop him, Erik propelled himself from her arms to the old man's.

Suddenly the ragged old man, in tattered clothes and broken-down shoes and straggly beard and a young child with a face full of giggles were in full embrace. The baby, in an act of total trust and love, laid his tiny head upon the man's shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and tears dripped beneath his lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain, cradled the baby and stroked his back. Erik's Mother was awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms, the onlookers averted their eyes and bowed their heads, as he said to the Mother, "You take good care of this Baby for me." Somehow she managed to say, "I will. I will".

He handed Erik back to her and said, "May God bless you, Ma'am. This is Christmas for me."

The Mother couldn't speak through her tears, but managed to mutter, "Thanks!" With Erik in her arms, she ran to the car, by now crying aloud, saying, "My God! My God! Forgive me."

Those parents and the patrons in the diner that day witnessed God's love made known through the innocence of a tiny child, in the person of a battered and broken old man. That, of course, is the story of Christmas.

The story didn't happen just once on that day in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, it happens every day in hearts that are opened to the reality of His Presence, sometimes in places and people we least expect.

Merry Christmas!