

“Christ the Gatherer”

A story called “Christmas Solitaire.” Deborah Forster sat alone in her apartment on 64th Street. The apartment building was located in the old section of town and was in desperate need of repair from years of neglect. Deborah sat motionless, gazing at her Christmas tree, or what was supposed to be her tree. She had found the tree two years ago in an alley behind some boxes. The tree was an old artificial tree, faded and broken in many places. The ornaments consisted of a few strands of tinsel, a string of colored light, and a little plastic angel. Deborah got up and made herself a cup of tea, then sat down to a game of solitaire.

Solitaire was her hobby. She would play solitaire for hours, sometimes even forgetting to eat. The cards were bent at the corners and faded from many years of use. After a couple of hours playing, she stretched, yawned and took another look at her tree. She studied it closely. “Funny,” she thought as she keened her eye on the angel. It seemed to be smiling at her. The way the light reflected off the angel made it glow, and filled the room with human warmth. The angel’s arms were stretched out as if it wanted to hug Deborah. She sat back down and listened to the outside noises.

She heard faint footsteps, gradually getting louder. Then she heard Christmas carols being sung. She saw a handful of change on the table and thought about giving it to the kids. She got up to get the change, but stopped, thinking to herself, “If I don’t make any noise they’ll go away ...” She never finished the thought when a loud crash echoed throughout the apartment. The old plastic angel had fallen off the tree and shattered into numerous pieces. The face of the angel looked different now ... she was frowning!

Consider the story of your own life, particularly in comparison to Deborah Forster. Ask yourself this Advent Season, “Are you playing “Christmas solitaire” ... are you withholding yourself from the outstretched arms of Christ, who would gather you to himself? It is a fair question, one that provokes reflection; for the act of gathering is a Christmas practice, when you think about it. Particularly at this time of year ... families gather ... congregations gather ... friends gather ... communities gather ... yes, even shoppers gather! Indeed, it is dangerous for us *not* to gather. For many, the holiday season witnesses the greatest period of depression than any other time of year ... mostly by the “un-gathered.” Who are the un-gathered? --- the solitary ... the lonely ... the isolated ... otherwise the ones cut-off from society.

The Bible makes several important points regarding the act of gathering. The most oft-used metaphor is that of the shepherd gathering his flock. ... Jesus is known as the Good Shepherd ... the One who gathers his flock into safe-keeping; they belong to him and he belongs to them! Another agrarian metaphor is contained in today’s Gospel Lesson where John the Baptizer foretells that Jesus would “gather the wheat into his granary ...” The Greek word for ‘gather’ is *synago* from which comes the word synagogue ... a synagogue is a gathering place of worship.

Jesus was a gatherer. He gathered his disciples. He gathered crowds about him. Many of Jesus’ parables were about gathering. Jesus’ stories depicted his Heavenly Father gathering the prodigal, the tax-collector, the prostitute, the publican, the Samaritan, sinners of every stripe who sought to be gathered through the doorway of repentance. As the Scriptures says: Jesus gathered them “as a hen gathers her brood under his wings.”

Jesus Christ desires to gather in you ... me ... that we may be included in the final harvest. But not even Christ can gather you in if you do not want to be gathered. Not even the Spirit can put fire in your heart against your will. And so, even though the backdrop is the inevitable awesomeness of eternity ... even though we are warned of the wrath to come ... we must make the actual decision to flee from it. John the Baptizer tells us that we must repent ... and then show that our repentance is real by improving our conduct. Also, Jesus explains that repentance is an appropriate response to the announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom. Unfortunately, some may choose to be chaff rather than grain, thereby refusing to be gathered in. In this sense,

John the Baptizer's wind and fire are yet valid. However, for those who choose or allow themselves to be gathered in by Christ the gatherer, the fire produces that 'strange warmed heart' that John Wesley speaks of.

There is another story titled *The Winter of the Fisher*. It is the story of one year in the life of an animal called Fisher. A fisher is a dark brown, fierce and fox-like marten. An old Indian, who lives alone in the woods in the Fisher's domain, is one of two human characters in the account. The Indian enters the story by saving the Fisher from a forest fire and later the steel jaws of a trap. In the closing scene, the old Indian is feeling very old, lonely, empty, and hungering --- as he says ---from a poverty of human contact. In one scene he is sitting on the bank of a lake, reflecting on his coming death.

He honors an old tribal custom of cutting notches on the bone of a bear --- a notch for every year one wants to live. Five years before, the old Indian had made five notches, and now thoughts of death and isolation are upon him. He hears a noise beside him ... it is the Fisher. Normally dark and distant and dangerous, the Fisher nuzzles against him and sits down silently by his side. And in the miracle and marvel of it, the old Indian laughs inside and ... aloneness gives way to life ... thoughts of ending turn to new beginnings ... and so he picks up his yellowed and aged bear bone and cuts five more new notches.

In so many ways that is how life really is! Those situations, those circumstances that are dark and dangerous to us are tamed by Jesus Christ ... who rules all things and comes to gather our lives unto himself. "Apartness is apartness ... solitariness is solitariness ... separation is separation --- just as bread is bread and wine is wine. However, in communion with the Christ, bread and wine become Life and Includedness --- filling the shadows and the silence with a hope that cuts five more notches. And in the marvel and miracle of it all ... we laugh with a laughter that holds the sound of Christmas."

Yes, this is the season of in-gathering, where we gather again at the manger and realize for ourselves the all-embracing love of the Son of God. My hope is that you will mentally and spiritually journey to Bethlehem this season, and see for yourself the radiance of faith that glows from the One called the Christ Child. I want to encourage you ... never permit life's experiences from preventing you from choosing to be gathered in. Never permit that which is past to stop you from moving closer to God ... for running to meet you with open arms is Christ ... who longs for his prodigal children to return. The Baptizer's message seems harsh, insulting the people, threatening judgment, demanding repentance, insisting upon a rigorous standard of conduct. But the people of John's time knew that his message is gospel because they knew that the purpose of his preaching is to ensure that they end up as part of the harvest. We must hear and realize that same thought. Christ calls out to us in love ... welcomes us with sheer grace ... and gathers us to himself in peace.

During World War II Martin Niemoller was imprisoned at Dachau in Nazi Germany. He could see a gallows from his cell, and each time someone was hanged, his mind was in a turmoil. Naturally he would pray for the victim --- and, equally naturally, he would rehearse the curse he planned to hurl at his tormentors when it was his turn to stand there at the gallows. But then he would wonder ... what would have happened if Christ had cursed those who put him on the gallows. Had Christ prayed against rather than for ... had he died against rather than for his enemies --- there would have been no gospel at all ... EVER ... for anyone. Somehow Niemoller escaped the gallows, and after the war he expressed the essence of the gospel when he posed this crucial question: "Do I really know that Christ prayed for me; that Christ died for me, there on Calvary?"

The Season of Advent is a time to raise such personal questions in our own life. Do we know ... despite everything that has gone on in our life, everything that is going on currently in our life ... Do we know that Christ prays to us, Christ dies for us ... daily. Now is not the time for Christmas Solitaire! Now is the time to take seriously our life in terms of Christmas faith! Now is not the time to squander our life in thoughts of hopelessness and despair, but the time to laugh quietly inside ... for aloneness gives way to life ... thoughts of ending turn to new beginnings ... time to cut a few new notches ... for God is sending us Christ the Gatherer ... who will open wide his arms and include us ... who will grace us into his fold ... if we chose ... if we allow ourselves to be loved by him. This Advent Season surrender your life to Christmas love! Amen!