

New and Different

- I Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52; Colossians 3:12-17
- December 27, 2009
- W. Kenneth Williams, First Baptist Church of Rochester
A story sermon adapted from "Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul," by Paula McDonald. Page 68-77, 1997

The McDonald children had been stuck in the house on that long winter afternoon – bickering, teasing, and fighting over their toys, particularly Eric and Kelly, who were only a year apart.

Their mother listened at the argument coming from the living room. This was supposed to be the season of sharing and love, of warm feelings and happy hearts. But how could she convince her children that being kind to each other was the most important way to get ready for Christmas?

Then she had an idea. Years before her grandmother told her about an old Christmas custom that helped people discover the real meaning of Christmas. Perhaps it would work for her family too. She gathered the four rascals together and sat them down on the stairs, smallest to tallest – Mike, Randi, Kelly and Eric.

"How would you like to start a new Christmas project this year?" she asked. "It's like a game, but it can only be played by people who can keep a secret. Can everyone here do that? They all shouted "I can!"

"Well, here is how it works. This year we are going to surprise Baby Jesus when he comes on Christmas Eve by making him the softest bed in the world. We're going to build a little crib for him to sleep in right here in our house, and we'll fill it with straw to make it comfortable. But here's the catch: Each piece of straw we put in the manger will represent one kind thing we do for someone between now and Christmas. The more kind things we do, the more straw there will be for the Baby Jesus. The secret part is – we can't tell anyone what good things we are doing and who we are doing them for."

Of course the kids had questions – "How will Baby Jesus know it's his bed?" "Who will we do kind things for?"

"Jesus will know, and we will do kind things for each other. Once every week between now and Christmas, we'll put our names in this hat, and we'll draw a name and do kind things for that person for a whole week. But here's the hard part. We can't tell anyone whose name we've drawn for that week, and we'll each try to do as many favors as we can for our special person without getting caught. For every secret good thing we do, we'll put a piece of straw in the crib."

"What if I pick someone I don't like?" frowned Kelly.

After a moment, Mother said, "Maybe you could use extra fat straws for the good things you do for that person, because they might be harder to do. But just think how much faster the fat straws will fill up our crib. Then on Christmas Eve we'll put Baby Jesus in his little bed, and he'll sleep that night on a mattress made of love. I think he'd like that, don't you?"

Since Eric was the oldest, he made the crib – one leg an inch too short so the crib rocked a bit, but they agreed it was the best crib in the world.

Then they went out looking for straw, finally finding grass that had dried down to yellow stalks, looking like real straw. That night, they sat at the supper table and six names were written onto separate pieces of paper, folded up and shuffled around in an old baseball hat.

Kelly picked first and immediately giggled. Randi went next, then Dad. Mother picked a name, then little Mike who couldn't read yet so Dad whispered his name into his ear. Finally Eric chose. As he unfolded the paper, a frown crossed his face but he said nothing, just stuffing the paper into his pocket.

The week that followed was filled with surprises. Kelly would enter her bedroom to find her nightgown neatly laid out and her bed turned down. Someone cleaned up the sawdust under the workbench without being asked. Jelly blobs disappeared magically from the kitchen counter while Mother was out getting the mail. While Eric was brushing his teeth, someone made his bed. Dad couldn't find his shoes but before he left for work, they were back in the closet, all shined up.

The changes in the kids were noticeable. They weren't teasing or fighting as much. An argument would start, then stop for no apparent reason. Even Eric and Kelly seemed to be getting along better. In fact, all the children wore secret smiles and giggled to themselves at times.

The second week brought more amazing events. Garbage was taken out without anyone being asked. Someone even did two of Kelly's hard math problems one night when she left her homework out on the table.

The pile of straw grew higher and softer. With only two weeks left until Christmas, the children wondered if the crib would be comfortable enough for the Baby Jesus.

On the final Sunday night of name picking, the family sat around the table waiting for the last set of names to be put in the hat. Mother told them they had all done a wonderful job for there must be hundreds of straws in the crib. But, she reminded them, there was one whole day left so they had time to make the bed even softer.

For the last time, the hat was passed around the table. Little Mike picked a name and Dad whispered into his ear. Randi chooses, peeked and smiled. Kelly giggled happily when she saw her name. Mother and Dad choose, then handed the cap to Eric. But as he unfolded the paper, he seemed ready to burst into tears and fled the room. By the time Mother reached his room, she found Eric tugging on his coat and carrying a small suitcase.

"I have to leave," he said quietly, through his tears. "If I don't, I'll spoil Christmas for everyone. I'll sleep in my snow fort for a few days, then I'll come home right after Christmas."

Mother started to object, saying he would freeze but Dad, now standing beside her, put his hand on her arm and shook his head. As the front door closed, they watched the little figure with the sadly slumped shoulders and no hat trudge across the street and sit down in the snow bank near the corner. It was very dark outside and cold, and a few snow flurries drifted down on the small boy and his suitcase.

About 10 minutes later, Mother walked across the street and sat down beside him on the snow bank. "What is it, Eric? You've been so good these last few weeks, but I know something has been bothering you since we first started the crib. Can you tell me, honey?"

“Mom, don’t you see? I’ve tried so hard, but I can’t do it anymore. And now I’m going to wreck Christmas for everyone!” “How could you possibly wreck Christmas? What can’t you do?”

“Mom,” said the little boy through his tears. “I got Kelly’s name all four weeks! And I hate Kelly! I can’t do one more nice thing for her or I’ll die! I tried, Mom. I really did. I sneaked into her room every night and fixed her bed. I even laid out her crummy nightgown. I emptied her wastebasket and did some of her homework when she went to the bathroom. I even let her use my race car one day, but she smashed it into the wall like always.

“I tried to be nice to her. Even when she called me stupid because the crib leg was short, I didn’t hit her. And every week, when we picked new names, I thought it would be over. But tonight, when I got her name again, I knew I couldn’t do one more nice thing for her. I just can’t. And tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. I’ll spoil Christmas for everyone just when we are ready to put Baby Jesus into the crib. Don’t you see why I had to leave?”

They sat silently, with Mother’s arm around Eric’s shoulder. Only an occasional hiccup or snuffle broke the silence.

Finally, Mother said, “Eric, I’m so proud of you. Every good thing you did should count as double because it was especially hard for you to be nice to Kelly for so long. But you did all those good things anyway, one straw at a time. You gave your love when it wasn’t easy to give. Maybe that’s what the spirit of Christmas is all about. If it’s too easy to give, maybe we’re not really giving much of ourselves after all. The straws you’ve added were probably the most important ones, and you should be proud of yourself.

“Now, how would you like a chance to earn a few easy ones like the rest of us? I still have a name I picked tonight and I haven’t looked at it yet. Why don’t we switch, just for the last day? It will be our secret.”

“That’s not cheating,” Eric asked.

“It’s not cheating,” replied Mother.

Together they dried the tears, brushed off the snow and walked back to the house.

The next day the whole family was busy cooking and straightening up the house for Christmas Day, wrapping last-minute presents and trying hard not to burst with excitement. But even with all the activity and eagerness, a flurry of new straws piled up in the crib, and by nightfall it was overflowing. At different times while passing by, each member of the family, big and small, would pause and look at the wonderful pile for a moment, then smile before going on. It was almost time for the tiny crib to be used. But was it soft enough? One straw might still make the difference.

For that very reason, just before bedtime, Mother tiptoed to Kelly’s room to lay out the little blue nightgown and turn down the bed. But she stopped at the door, surprised. Someone had already been there. The nightgown was laid neatly across the bed, and a small red race car rested next to in on the pillow.

The last straw was Eric’s after all.