

*Sam Mayer's Christmas Letter:
"Sitting Beside Joseph on Christmas Eve"*
Matthew 25:31-40

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When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I had planned to preach what I hoped would be a useful sermon on the lectionary's Gospel text for today on the baptism of Jesus. But things happened. First, last month I preached a sermon on Mary reminding us all—especially me—that we need to stay open to God's interruptions of our plans. Secondly, at Andrew Black's ordination on December 28, Elder Bruce Black charged our congregation to, among other things, "continue to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, empower the peacemakers, and love your neighbors, especially when they trespass against you." But mainly, Joseph happened, here in this room, on Christmas Eve. And while I, and many of you, witnessed what happened, our own Sam Mayer was so moved, so blessed by it, that he went home and wrote it down as his Christmas letter to his family and friends.

I believe it is a moving proclamation of the Matthew 25 passage we've already heard and the Hebrews 13 passage I'll read at the end. Sam titled his letter *Sitting Beside Joseph on Christmas Eve*. Sam's a little embarrassed by all the attention, but since I believe this needs to be proclaimed here, he gave me permission to do that today. Hear now, Sam's letter to all of us:

He swirled in like a dust devil, right past Ruth Price, ushering in the narthex on Christmas Eve 2008. All she could do was mouth quietly, "Sam," since the Service had already started, pointing down the aisle, and whispering, "He's looking for Central and Bridge." Being summoned, I looked and saw something that reminded me of Charlie Brown. Actually, it was "Pigpen," in a cloud of dust, heading toward the chancel. Moving quickly, I still didn't catch up to him until he stopped, bowed, made

the sign of the cross, and entered the second pew from the *front* of the sanctuary. He left me just enough space to squeeze in next to him as he sat down.

“So, you’re looking for Central and Bridge?” I asked. “Yes, but first I need to see the Midnight Mass,” he replied. I welcomed him and hoped that others around me weren’t disappointed with my decision. Also, I hoped that they weren’t bothered by his stench of stale beer and an unwashed body. The young dad with his kids at the end of the row looked nervous. The 8:00 p.m. Candlelight Service was progressing, and I showed him where we were on the bulletin he held.

The night’s Service included a baptism. Pastor Mike officiated, and the Saffron and Layne Families were all aglow as their new baby boy joined the Covenant. My new friend looked at me and said something like, “Oh my God...It’s Baby Jesus!” And in many ways *it* was. He was clearly moved, and all I could think about was getting back to my duties on the lights and such. I had abandoned Margaret Cunningham with all of it. Reasoning that keeping our congregation safe was also an inherent part of duty to the church, I stayed seated next to our visitor.

Giving him one more opportunity to exit, I asked if he’d like those directions to Central and (the) bridge. “No,” he said, “I want to hear this.” We settled in and he listened and was awed by the music and the choir. He said he was Joseph. I told him I was Sam. He learned how to follow a bulletin. At one point he noticed two Albuquerque police officers across the aisle. It was our Ben Saffron and his colleague. They signaled me, asking if I needed help, and I responded with an “all is okay” sign. I felt more comfortable knowing they were there, but had to assure Joseph they were here to worship and not to bring him harm. He behaved and occasionally lost his place in the service.

When Pastor Karen gave her meditation in the place where a priest would stand, he declared, “This isn’t a Catholic Church.” I told him he was right and that we worship Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and he did too. He took in every word. During the offertory I slipped him \$5. He fought, “No, that’s yours.” I told him it was now his, and he could keep it or give it to the Baby Jesus. He threw the five in the plate as it passed, gleefully. The Candlelight Service brought him to tears. We held on to each other as we sang *Silent Night*. I sensed others around him touching him too. He was so grateful and asked to come back.

At the postlude, Joseph was greeted by many with very enthusiastic Christmas wishes, handshakes, hugs, and kisses, *from both sides of the aisle*. Now, I was getting teary. 2008 is an incredible year for many, many reasons. Some are good and some are not so good. Times are tough, but they can be a lot worse for some. After the bells, Pastor Mike and I attempted to direct him to Central and “bridge.” He suffers from seizures. Mike asked him if he had family to visit on Christmas, as I packed up his belongings from the huge sewer pipe on the Copper Street construction project in front of the sanctuary. All he had was in a bag or on his back. I let him keep the two six packs, since he said he sold them to earn money to eat. He promised Mike that he’d go to see his brother, although his brother fought with his wife.

I pray now, “Lord, thank you for Joseph’s being with his family today. May it also be a better day for all of us.”

I think Mike and I and several others were touched by Joseph on Christmas Eve. He certainly helped put my world into greater perspective. I never seem to have enough interesting information to be able to write a Christmas letter. However, since

this was not about my entire year, I thought I could manage sharing just One Great Hour of *joy*! As Dennis Selly said to Joseph upon greeting him, “It’s all about love.” Christ’s Love, indeed! *Happy Birthday, Jesus!*

And the writer of Hebrews 13:1-2 proclaims:

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares.”

Amen.