

Clara grew up in a large house in a small Minnesota town. She was what we call a “PK”, a pastor’s kid. Her father was pastor of a two-point parish, one congregation in town and a smaller one in the country about four miles south of town. Both congregations had been founded by Swedish immigrants in the 1870’s. All four of Clara’s grandparents had emigrated from Sweden when they were small children, so her family was thoroughly steeped in Swedish traditions. The coming of Christmas meant making julekake, pepparkakor, spritz, lefse, and lutefisk.

The schedule on Christmas Eve was always the same. 4:00 worship at the church in the country and 11:00 worship at the church in town. In between, her family would sit down and have a huge dinner, which included meatballs for those who couldn’t stomach the lutefisk. After dinner, Clara and her sisters were immediately ready to open their gifts. But every year their mother said the same thing, “No opening of gifts until the dishes are washed and the kitchen is cleaned up.” The children would groan as if this was a surprise, but then they helped clear the table and the dishes would get washed in record time.

Soon everyone was gathered around the Christmas tree, but it was still not quite time to open the gifts. Clara’s father would bring out the large family Bible and read the Christmas story from Luke’s gospel. He never said so in so many words, but Clara came to understand that it was his way of helping the family remember that the true purpose of Christmas is not just to exchange gifts, but to celebrate the first Christmas Gift that God gave to all people of every place and time – a gift that was wrapped and placed in a manger.

Then Clara’s father would pray. The prayer probably lasted about two minutes, but to Clara and her sisters who had their eyes on the packages under the tree, it seemed like two hours. Every year the prayer followed the same pattern of thanksgiving and praise, and it always concluded with her father praying for people they knew who were experiencing tough times (people who were unemployed, recently divorced, or seriously ill) and finally, remembering by name the members of their family who had died – Grandma Billstrom and Grandpa Holmgren, Uncle Oscar, cousin Robert, a flight instructor who had died in a plane crash, and cousin Bill who had been born with spina bifida and died when he was two years old. Clara’s mother always began to cry at this point and when the prayer concluded she would walk out to the kitchen to dry her tears and compose herself. Then she’d return with a smile on her face and the family began to open their gifts.

Clara was puzzled for many years at why her father used the occasion of Christmas Eve to pray for the people who were hurting and give thanks for those of their family who had died. It seemed kind of out of place to her, on such a joyful night to think about sad things. So one year, when she was fifteen, she asked her father about the prayer and he explained it to her this way:

“Clara, Christmas is important for everyone, but it is most important for those people who know pain and sorrow and despair. When I read the Christmas story, I see two groups of people identified. First is God’s chosen people, the people of Israel, represented by Mary and Joseph. Luke starts the story by reminding us that the people of Israel were not free at this time. They were ruled by Emperor Augustus of Rome and his appointed governor in Syria, Quirinius. Centuries earlier, prophets like Isaiah had foretold that a descendant of David, a messiah, would arise to restore the kingdom of Israel, but the messiah had not come, Rome’s grip was iron-tight, and the people were despairing of God’s promise. They had lost hope. Do you know who the second group of people in the story is?”

Clara thought for a moment and said, “The only other people mentioned in the story are the shepherds.”

“That’s right,” said her dad. “The shepherds are the first people who learned of the birth of Jesus. This is a significant detail that we shouldn’t overlook. Back in those days, shepherds were considered to be on the lowest rung of society. They were perceived as dirty and immoral men who were not welcome inside the city. For the angels to come first to the shepherds was to come to people who felt isolated and despised. They also were people who had no hope.”

“All too often, Clara, when we think of Christmas we think only of large, healthy families sharing a wonderful meal and exchanging gifts. But the people who most need the message of Christmas, the message that God has become one of us and suffers with us, are those that are easy to forget. That’s why we remember them in our prayers.”

“That makes sense,” said Clara. “But what does Christmas have to do with remembering those who have died?”

“Well, the time of our life when we are most without hope is when we face death. We then realize how helpless and insignificant we really are. But the coming of Jesus announces that God does not leave us without hope. Christmas is significant only because of Good Friday and Easter. Without Jesus’ death and resurrection, his birth would have no significance and no one would celebrate Christmas. But because there is an Easter, Christmas is a celebration of God entering our world and giving us hope. Hope for this life with all of its challenges and hope for continued life with God on the other side of death. We remember grandma and grandpa and our other family members who have died because the birth of Christ gives us the confident hope that they are still in God’s care.”

That made sense to Clara. Now she understood why her father had also prayed for the families whose father or mother worked at the factory that was going to close in January. Now she understood why they prayed for her friend Karen’s family. Karen’s parents had gone through a divorce this year, and even though they were dealing with the situation pretty well, the expectations of Christmas (when everyone is supposed to be cheery) seemed to magnify the hurt. And she understood why they prayed for the Larson’s, whose grandfather has Alzheimer’s and doesn’t even recognize them anymore.

All of these people, and thousands more like them, need to hear the words addressed to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” They need to hear the message, “This Jesus is God in the flesh, and he has come to share and heal your pain and replace your despair with hope.”

Clara is now a mother herself. And the traditions her family follows at Christmas are very similar to the ones she knew growing up. She is now the one who reads the Christmas story and prays the prayer for God’s hurting people. And tonight when she reads it, she will include her father’s name, who died this past year, and she will cry, and she will smile, for she knows that the words of this next carol are true:

Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
Now you need not fear the grave; Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all to gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!