

**“In This World of Sin”  
Christmas Eve 2012**

**Pastor Wayne Peterson  
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Do you recognize the name Larry DePrimo? Probably not, but you perhaps remember seeing a photo of him, as have millions of others. Larry is an officer with the New York Police Department who, a few weeks ago on a cold November evening, came across a man who was sitting barefoot outside a store on the Upper West Side. Officer DePrimo probably deals with folks we call “street people” on every single shift. He is not part of a social service agency whose job is to help the homeless. He is a police officer. His job is to enforce the law, keep the peace, and maintain public order. Consequently, I would guess that he is trained not to get too emotionally involved with individuals, both because it may hinder his ability to deal impartially with all people he encounters and because it may distract him from observing and preventing illegal behavior happening on the other side of the street. But on this particular cold evening, when even his feet in two pair of wool socks were cold, the sight of this man’s bare feet on the cold concrete caused Officer DePrimo’s compassion to trump regulations. He went into a Sketchers store and bought the man a new pair of insulated boots and thermal socks. When the store owner heard the story, he gave a 25% discount, so Officer DePrimo paid \$75 and brought the boots and socks out to the man.

This act of kindness would have gone unnoticed, as most acts of kindness do, except that a tourist from Arizona happened to walk by at the very moment Officer DePrimo was kneeling beside the man as he gave him the new boots. Jennifer Foster, who works in law enforcement herself, took a picture and posted it on her Facebook page. From there, it made its way to the Huffington Post blog and the NYPD website. Then the media picked up this “feel good” story and it was published in newspapers across the nation.

What a great story for the Christmas season – a selfless act of charity and kindness to set an example for all of us about caring for our neighbor. It was such a great story that it called for a follow-up. You know, let’s interview Officer DePrimo and the homeless man and find out how this act of charity transformed their lives. So a reporter from the *New York Times* went out to find the homeless man in the photo. It was a fairly easy task. After making a few inquiries on the Upper West Side, the reporter found 54-year old Jeffrey Hillman, who surprisingly was again barefoot. “Why aren’t you wearing the boots?” asked the reporter. Jeffrey replied very practically, “Those shoes are hidden. They are worth a lot of money. I could lose my life [if I wear them around here].”

Jeffrey had very kind words to say about Officer DePrimo. "I wish there were more people like him in the world," he said. But Jeffrey also complained about becoming an unwilling participant in this story. He felt that the media was making money off the story (which is true), and he got nothing. "I was put on YouTube, was put on everything without permission. What do I get?" he asked. "I want a piece of the pie."

The *Times* ran a story about the irony that life on the streets is so fraught with danger that a homeless man dare not wear new boots. Then a reporter for the *New York Daily News* did more investigating and discovered that Jeffrey Hillman is not homeless. He has an apartment in the Bronx paid for by a federal program. Furthermore, he has been receiving services from the Department of Homeless for three years. An official with the department noted that though Jeffrey has received some assistance, "he is not dressed for the weather, he is not engaged in a healthy lifestyle, and he is not leading a productive life." The official suggested that Jeffrey may have mental health and substance abuse issues.

I heard this story reported by Scott Simon on National Public Radio two weeks ago. Mr. Simon concluded his report with these wise words: "I don't like to think that because Jeffrey Hillman turns out to be less needy and more complicated than he appeared to be in a tourist's video, Officer DePrimo's kindness now looks useless – or foolish. He saw a cold, hurting man and helped him on the spot. He didn't tell him, 'Don't worry, sir, I contribute to charities and support government programs that will help a lot of people who suffer from a social pathology similar to yours.' He bought the man a pair of shoes. Part of what makes an act of giving truly kind is that we recognize ourselves in those who need help, and know, but for a few zigs, zags and accidents, that could be us."

I must admit that as I was listening to Mr. Simon's report and learning that Jeffrey Hillman is not using the new boots and is not homeless and is evidently making some poor choices, I was less than charitable in my opinion of him. Here he has been given a gracious gift and he is not even using the gift. What a waste! What a sad situation!

Then it occurred to me that this story sounds a lot like one of Jesus' parables, the type of story that draws you in, gets you nodding along, and then zings you, leading you to recognize that the parable is about you. If Jesus told this story, it might go something like this:

"The kingdom of God is like..." (Jesus starts most of his parables with this phrase. Another way to say it is, "When God acts on earth as God acts in heaven...") "The kingdom of God is like a police officer who saw a homeless person who had no shoes. Out of his compassion, the officer stooped to give the man new shoes, so that he might be whole. The man rejoiced in the shoes for a day and then put them away and went on living without shoes. The kingdom of God is like that."

When I first heard the story, I identified with the police officer, the generous giver. But as I think about it more, I realize that in this story I am more often the homeless man who is given a gift and then goes on with life as if he had never received the gift.

When I was in Boston a year ago, I visited historic Trinity Church in the Back Bay. The congregation has been serving the Boston area since 1733, but its current magnificent building was erected under the leadership of the Rev. Phillips Brooks in the 1870's. Brooks was a man of great stature, both as one of the foremost preachers of his era and physically, standing 6'6" and weighing 300 pounds. Today, he is most remembered for a Christmas carol he wrote for a children's Christmas program. While serving Trinity Church in Philadelphia, he had visited the Holy Land in 1865 and was in Bethlehem for Christmas. Two years later, needing a song for the children's program at Trinity, he wrote a poem drawing on the memories of that visit to Bethlehem and asked his organist, Lewis Redner, to write a tune for it. Lewis struggled with the assignment, complaining of no inspiration, but the night before the program, Lewis finally came up with a melody. The next day, 36 children and 6 Sunday School teachers were the first people to sing, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

Many of us can sing the first stanza of several Christmas carols by memory. Unfortunately, the most important part, the real "meat" of a carol, is seldom in the first stanza. Tonight, I want you to focus on stanza three of Phillips Brooks' hymn. Take your bulletin and follow along as I read.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!  
So (in this way) God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav'n.  
No ear may hear his coming (no photos are being taken); but, in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him,  
still the dear Christ enters in.

As I think about the story of Officer DePrimo and Jeffrey Hillman, there are two phrases in this stanza that jump out at me. The first is "but in this world of sin." There is no more succinct or accurate way to describe our reality. I'm not talking about tragedies like Sandy Hook School or 60 Syrian refugees standing in line for bread being killed by their own government as happened on Saturday, though both are examples of living in a world of sin. I'm talking about the many aspects of our lives that fail to measure up to God's intent for us – choosing to live in fear rather than hope; choosing to put out trust in material things rather than in God; allowing relationships to wither because of our pride and self-centeredness rather than embrace the healing power of forgiveness.

The second phrase that jumps out at me is the last one: "Still the dear Christ enters in." This is an instance of where the phrasing of the music works against the meaning of the text. We sing "where meek souls will receive him still" and then take a breath, but the "still" goes with what follows – "where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in." The word "still" is very important, for it indicates that what happened in Bethlehem long ago has a continuing significance and impact on our lives.

Tonight we celebrate the Incarnation, God's ultimate gift, not only because of a past event in the little town of Bethlehem, but because this gift still has a daily impact on our lives. In Jesus, God took on human flesh so that we can directly receive his gift of love and learn what it means to live into the kingdom of God. But we honor that gift only if we wrap ourselves in it and wear it not just tonight, but 365 days a year. The good news tonight is that the gift of God's love in Jesus continues to be given, and for those who receive it humbly, the dear Christ still today enters their lives.

The fourth stanza is my favorite stanza of all Christmas carols, which is why it has been sung at every Christmas Eve service at St. Barnabas for 25 years. It is a prayer – a prayer for our world; a prayer for ourselves. Please pray it with me:

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;  
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;  
oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!

Amen.