



**WISCONSIN
CONFERENCE**
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

A Messy Christmas

Yesterday I saw the most immaculately decorated home. It was altogether perfect! Three Christmas trees, each uniquely adorned with ornaments. A crèche, a Santa, a train, a charming old sled—it was all so beautiful. A fire crackling, carols jingling, cookies displayed on Holly & Ivy platters . . . even a red Christmas bow on the dog! No signs of messiness or sadness or struggle. Immediately, I mused over the irony that this setting stood in stark contrast to my imagining of a chilly stable night in that obscure little Palestinian village, where Mary and Joseph huddled around a trough surrounded by smelly beasts and curious onlookers.

For several moments I marveled in this exquisite display of festive cheer. I even felt nostalgic, remembering my own childhood traditions, recalling in particular my father's insistence on a "Charlie Brown" spruce tree rather than a statelier Fraser fir. For years I thought such a dud of a tree reflected our family's necessity to "live within our means" (no doubt partially true), but I've since come to realize it also reflected the reality of celebrating Christmas amidst the imperfections and hardships of life. We used to joke that our tree was the least wanted, most overlooked misfit on the lot!

In ministry, our most important Christmas preparations come in remembering and reaching out to those too easily overlooked. Every year, in the pastorate, I would make a list of those who were suffering—the grieving, the broken, the unemployed, the sick, the depressed and despairing. In crafting my Christmas messages I kept them close to my mind and centered in my heart. This year, some of you have suffered. My prayer is that the love of God, made known to us in the Spirit of the Christ child, will bring a measure of comfort and some moments of peace despite it all.

One of the most precious Christmas pageant memories I carry happened in the late 1970's. We decided to hold the annual Children's Program in a real barn, on a working dairy farm just a few

miles out of town. In addition to the usual imperfections and stumbles, it was all so raw. The smells of manure and silage filled the cold wintry air. The sound of a bellowing expectant cow provided a backdrop as the children sang Away in the Manger. My fellow shepherds and I huddled for warmth and laughed while stepping in cow pies. It was so imperfect, so very messy, yet wondrously sacred and unforgettably beautiful. Somehow, this is true Christmas—the place where our lingering sadness meets deep joy, where our troubled and disheveled lives find calm and order, and where all our fears and failures are “met in Thee” with a holy reassurance and grace beyond our imagination.

Wishing you a blessed Advent and a joyful Christmas!

Franz