

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 12/30/2022

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Traditions are important for remembering and celebrating memories and history. We have traditions in our country, in our communities, and in our churches. I've served churches that have annual lutefisk dinners, Father's Day concerts, Christmas tree raising parties, posadas (following the wisemen to find the CHRIST child), and shivarees (wedding hazing). And it's good to have family traditions, too. My family always has ebelskivers (pancake balls) on New Year's Day to continue a Danish heritage tradition.

Traditions can help to teach and instill faith practices in families as well. Many families pray together before meals, or bed, or vacation trips. Families worship together weekly and/or at special festival times. Some families do regular devotions to begin or end the day. My late wife, Lori, and I, looked for ways of witnessing to the children we had been honored to sponsor in baptism. One of those was purchasing a nativity set for each child. Then beginning on the child's second Christmas, they would receive one figure of that nativity creche each year until they had the full set.

It's good for families to be intentional about the traditions they carry on or consider developing. Because of my busy schedule on Christmas Eve, Lori and I started a new tradition related to gift giving. In our family, we celebrate with our children December 6, the Festival of St. Nicholas. Following some of the stories about this church bishop from whom many of our Christmas practices come, we have our children put their shoes outside their bedroom door on the night before St. Nicholas Day. In the morning, the children find chocolate coins in their shoes. Nicholas was said to leave gifts of money in the shoes of the children of his village. Then, the children each or together receive one big gift. When Christmas Eve comes, we don't open gifts. We worship, eat, sing, and share time together, talking about the birth of the JESUS. Because the kids had already received a gift on St. Nicholas Day, they don't lament that their friends were getting gifts on Christmas. But we extend the seasonal celebration to January 6. This day is Epiphany, the day the church commemorates the coming of the magi to visit the CHRIST child. In our family, on Epiphany, after reading the story of the visit of the wisemen, each person receives three gifts in remembrance of the three gifts given by the magi.

Some friends of ours wanted to teach their children about generosity and providing assistance to the poor so, when their children were young, they developed an additional practice of giving. After the gifts were opened, the children were asked to choose one of their gifts that their family would then deliver in person to a needy family. At first, the kids picked gifts that were less desirable. As time went along, though, and the children saw the joy and gratitude of the receiving family, the children became more charitable in what they decided to give. One year, the parents decided to give their kids a few small things, but one really big gift—a train set mounted on a large sheet of plywood. The kids were thrilled with this gift. But when it came time to choose what to give to the needy, the kids said they wanted to give the train. My friends were shocked that they were going to have to give this gift that they had invested much time and cost in. But they were also extremely pleased that the lessons they sought to teach had truly been learned.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey