

Sunday, December 23, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - A Cup of Christmas Tea"

Sometimes you just need to be with your people.

You long for those who have known you since you were a child – the people who understand you, who love you unconditionally.

For Mary, young, confused, excited, it made sense to head to the hill country to the home of her cousin, Elizabeth.

There she was greeted with joy – no judgment, no criticism – just pure happiness that she was there.

This is the type of family gathering we all crave.

We want to walk in the door and feel the warm embrace of people who love us.

This is truly what the Christmas season is about.

It is a time when we celebrate our connections to one another and we remember that love that is strong is rekindled with each visit.

There is joy in storytelling, reminiscing, just being in each other's presence.

Much of the Christmas activity is focused on our youngest family members, the children, but it is also a time when we appreciate our elder family members.

In 1996 my sister gave my son a book for Christmas called "A Cup of Christmas Tea."

Each year I revisit the story to remind myself of the importance of acknowledging the important people in my life.

This year I want to share it with you.

A Cup of Christmas Tea

by Tom Hegg

"The log was in the fireplace, all spiced and set to burn
At last the yearly Christmas race was in the clubhouse turn.
The cards were in the mail, all the gifts beneath the tree
And 30 days reprieve till VISA could catch up with me.
Though smug satisfaction seemed the order of the day
Something still was nagging me and would not go away
A week before I got a letter from my old great Aunt

It read: Of course I'll understand completely if you can't
But if you find you have some time how wonderful if we
Could have a little chat and share a cup of Christmas tea.
She'd had a mild stroke that year which crippled her left side
Though house bound now my folks had said it hadn't hurt her pride
They said: She'd love to see you. What a nice thing it would be
For you to go and maybe have a cup of Christmas tea.
But boy! I didn't want to go. Oh, what a bitter pill
To see an old relation and how far she'd gone downhill
I remembered her as vigorous, as funny and as bright
I remembered Christmas Eves when she regaled us half the night.
I didn't want to risk all that. I didn't want the pain.
I didn't need to be depressed. I didn't need the strain.
And what about my brother? Why not him? She's his aunt, too!
I thought I had it justified, but then before I knew
The reasons not to go I so painstakingly had built
Were cracking wide and crumbling in an acid rain of guilt.
I put on boots and gloves and cap, shame stinging every pore
And armed with squeegee, sand and map, I went out my front door.
I drove in from the suburbs to the older part of town
The pastels of the newer homes gave way to gray and brown.
I had that disembodied feeling as the car pulled up
And stopped beside the wooden house that held the Christmas cup.
How I got up to her door I really couldn't tell...
I watched my hand rise up and press the button of the bell.
I waited, aided by my nervous rocking to and fro
And just as I was thinking I should turn around and go
I heard the rattle of the china in the hutch against the wall
The triple beat of two feet and a crutch came down the hall.
The clicking of the door latch and the sliding of the bolt
And a little swollen struggle popped it open with a jolt.
She stood there pale and tiny, looking fragile as an egg
I forced myself from staring at the brace that held her leg.
And though her thick bifocals seemed to crack and spread her eyes
Their milky and refracted depths lit up with young surprise.
Come in! Come in! She laughed the words. She took me by the hand
And all my fears dissolved away as if by her command.
We went inside and then before I knew how to react
Before my eyes and ears and nose was Christmas past, alive, intact!
The scent of candied oranges, of cinnamon and pine,
The antique wooden soldiers in their military line,
The porcelain Nativity I'd always loved so much,
The Dresden and the crystal I'd been told I mustn't touch.

My spirit fairly bolted like a child out of class
And danced among the ornaments of calico and glass.
Like magic I was six again, deep in a Christmas spell
Steeped in the million memories the boy inside knew well.
And here among old Christmas cards so lovingly displayed
A special place of honor for the ones we kids had made.
And there, beside her rocking chair, the center of it all
My great Aunt stood and said how nice it was that I had come to call.
I sat and rattled on about the weather and the flu
She listened very patiently then smiled and said, "What's new?"
Thoughts and words began to flow. I started making sense
I lost the phony breeziness I use when I get tense.
She was still passionately interested in everything I did.
She was positive. Encouraging. Like when I was a kid.
Simple generalities still sent her into fits
She demanded the specifics. The particulars. The bits.
We talked about the limitations that she'd had to face
She spoke with utter candor and with humor and good grace.
Then defying the reality of crutch and straightened knee
On wings of hospitality she flew to brew the tea.
I sat alone with feelings that I hadn't felt in years.
I looked around at Christmas through a thick hot blur of tears.
And the candles and the holly she'd arranged on every shelf
The impossibly good cookies she still somehow baked herself.
But these rich and tactile memories became quite pale and thin
When measured by the Christmas my great Aunt kept deep within.
Her body halved and nearly spent, but my great Aunt was whole
I saw a Christmas miracle, the triumph of a soul.
The triple beat of two feet and a crutch came down the hall
The rattle of the china in the hutch against the wall.
She poured two cups. She smiled and then she handed one to me
And then we settled back and had a cup of Christmas tea."

My friends, the Christmas season gives us the opportunity to do things that we might forget to do otherwise.

We reach out to neighbors, to friends, perhaps to strangers, extending our hand of Christian love.

We are reminded that Mary accepted God's gift of an extraordinary child and celebrated with heartfelt joy with her beloved cousin.

Now that much of the craziness of the Christmas preparations has passed, let us come to Christmas Eve with hearts wide open.

Put aside your differences.

Surrender any judgments you have made.

Let old grudges wither.

Nourish your soul this Christmas with hope and peace, with love and joy.

Listen for the angels or perhaps you might be an angel yourself.