

*A Visit from Emmanuel*  
Christmas Eve 2011  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

I started out as a pastor in a small town in Kansas. During one of my years there, *we* invited the local nursing home to come to worship on Christmas Eve. Okay, *I* invited them to come to worship on Christmas Eve. It seemed like a nice thing to do. Many of the residents didn't have any family in town. They didn't have a place to belong. So, without clearing it with anyone, I went ahead and asked them to join us.

That might not sound like a big deal, but these weren't your typical nursing home residents. This was a *county* home. The residents were poor, their clothes someone else's castaways, their personal hygiene not exactly up to par. On top of everything, many of them were lacking basic social skills. Little did I know how complicated that would make things on Christmas Eve.

To my surprise, all sixteen residents of the home joined us for worship that evening. In fact, they came a full hour early. A less-than-helpful nurses' aide accompanied them, but once he got them in the door, he was nowhere to be found. It soon became apparent that most of the residents hadn't spent any time in a church. They were overwhelmed by the new surroundings. They literally tiptoed into the sanctuary. I welcomed them, encouraging them to sit down anywhere they wanted to and get comfortable.

They took me at my word. They decided to sit in the front two rows. For the next twenty minutes or so, all sixteen of them, with their puffy winter coats, did their best to squeeze into those two pews. They didn't fit. This led to lots of squirming and fidgeting. Finally someone got the bright idea that they would actually fit better in three pews. And so, with no small amount of effort, they got up and repositioned themselves. That took another ten minutes.

The congregation began arriving. They immediately noticed the newcomers. This was a small town, after all, where everybody knew everybody, or so they thought. But they couldn't quite make out the new folks down front. They certainly weren't the usual churchgoers who sat in those pews. What was going on?

By the time everyone had found a place to sit, the church was packed. The service began. The nursing home residents nervously shuffled their bulletins. We sang the first carol. The residents sat quietly and listened. By the time we got to the second carol, the residents decided to try singing. They weren't exactly on pitch, but they definitely put their hearts into it. By the time we got to the third carol—there's no polite way to say this—they were making a holy racket. The entire congregation turned and looked at them.

In the middle of the prayers, the sanctuary got very still. One of the residents blurted out, "What are they doing now?" which was followed by the quasi-liturgical response: *Shh, be quiet! We're in church.* "But I want to know what's going on." *Shh, be quiet! We're in church.* By this time, the congregation was staring at them.

We got ready to sing *Silent Night*. Row by row, we lit our candles and filled the room with the warm glow of candlelight. Most held their candles at their side, but not the residents of the nursing home. They were slowly making circles in the air and giggling with delight. More liturgical responses: "Do I have to blow out my candle?" *Shh, be quiet! We're in church.* As you might imagine, the stares of the congregation had now turned to icy glares.

The benediction couldn't come soon enough. As people got up to leave, they made a beeline straight for me. The more charitable among them said things like: "Umm, Pastor Vern, maybe we should have invited them to come at a more *convenient* time." The less charitable said things like: "They've ruined my Christmas!" The criticism stung, but I really couldn't blame the parishioners for their comments. It *was* a noisy, distracting service. It didn't feel the least bit holy.

After the congregation had filed out, the little group of sixteen was still in the front three pews. Nobody had told them to leave. Quite frankly, I'm not sure anybody had said a word to them. Feeling a bit shell-shocked, I slowly approached them. An older woman smiled at me and reached out to shake my hand. Another one said, "Thank you for inviting us." Still another, "Merry Christmas."

Then one of the residents—a young man who wasn't able to speak—handed me a bulletin. It had a drawing on it. The young man presented it to me with a smile on his face, looking rather proud of his creation. He had drawn a picture of the Advent wreath,

with four candles on the outside and the Christ Candle in the center. The candles were burning brightly. And, much to my surprise, the Advent wreath was not in the shape of a circle, but in the shape of a heart.

That picture was worth everything to me. In the wake of the messy, chaotic events of the evening, it told me that maybe the word had gotten through after all. Maybe, at some basic level, this young man—and others in the group—had received the message that Christmas is about love.

I have to say, in my 30 years of pastoral ministry, that's the Christmas service I remember the most. There are probably a couple of reasons for that. First, *I remember it because of the disruption in our well-ordered plans*. Isn't that what happens at Christmas? God comes to people like Mary and Joseph who are busy planning a wedding, God comes to some shepherds who are busy tending their sheep, and God says; "I've got a surprise for you." God has a way of breaking into our world when we least expect it and turning it upside down.

There's a second reason I remember that Christmas service. *The name of the nursing home was—no kidding—Emmanuel*. Emmanuel, which means, *God is with us*. Of course, it's a whole lot easier to imagine God being with us in a quiet, orderly candlelight service than one that is messy and a bit out of control. It's easier to imagine God being with us in folks that look and act like—well—you and me, than in folks who come from the county nursing home. But doesn't that say something about God as well? God is continually coming into our world, wherever we are, however messy things might happen to be, and God is saying, "I will be with you *here*...Emmanuel."

In the eyes of the world, Christmas is, at least for a season, us *at our best*. It's Norman Rockwell and Bing Crosby and *It's a Wonderful Life*. But that's really *not* Christmas, at least not the Christmas of the Bible. The Christmas of the Bible is about God bending low to earth...because far too often we are *at our worst*. Sometimes pastors make rash decisions without checking with anyone. Sometimes parishioners aren't the least bit charitable about who is sitting in their pews. Christ is born into *that* kind of world, into our kind of world. He's born to save us from our sins and shortsightedness. He's born to save us from ourselves, and to set the world right again.

In the past year at Zumbro, our focus has been on *creating a place for all to belong*. At times, our efforts have been sublime. At other times, they've been chaotic and challenging, and our well-ordered plans have gotten disrupted. Through it all, I think, we've learned that God has room for everyone in God's family; and that somehow, when we make room for others too, it's as if Jesus is being born into our world all over again.

The young man from Emmanuel Nursing Home got it exactly right: Christmas comes in the shape of a heart. It's about love. Not just our love, God's love. And there's more than enough of that love to go around.