



A nativity scene without Jews, Arabs, Africans, refugees, unwed mothers ...

December 2016

My Dear Friends:

Merry Christmas! And Happy Holidays! Like so many of you, looking back on this most unusual year, I can say without hesitation that I loved the World Series and hated the election! When I was in kindergarten at St. Timothy's on the North Side of Chicago, an 8th grade girl who lived at the corner of our block walked me to school every day. Her name was Sheila Hartnett. Her dad was Gabby Hartnett, the legendary Cubs catcher. And, even though in high school I became a White Sox fan, like all Chicagoans I've always had a special place in my heart for the "loveable losers" at Wrigley Field. I watched every one of the playoff games and died a thousand deaths during the ups and downs of the Series. Wept with joy the night they won! (Even learned to love Steve Goodman's "Go, Cubs, Go!" song, though his "Dying Cubs Fan's Blues" may have more poetic and musical merit.)

When the Hartnetts moved to the suburbs, the Gimbel family bought their house. I became good friends with Noel Gimbel who was my same age. He, being Jewish, went to Daniel Boone, our local public school. They got out fifteen minutes before St. Tim's, so most days Noel was waiting for me on the corner as I made my way home. And we'd play. In 3rd Grade (the year before the Fitzgeralds moved to the burbs) on our last school day before Easter break, my teacher, a Benedictine nun, delivered a passionate, scorching account of all the terrible things that "the Jews" had done to Jesus in Jerusalem, way back when, during the holy days we were about to celebrate. (Remember that I was hearing this with the ears and the soul of a 9-year-old.) I was truly distraught and horribly conflicted. I wasn't unaware that there were tensions in our neighborhood, which was evolving from mostly Irish and German to mostly Jewish. But that day it all got terribly personalized. How could I possibly play with someone whose people had done all those terrible things to the Son of God? I left school with my head aching and my heart turning. Started north on Talman street and spotted Noel up ahead, waiting on the corner. I was so confused! Jumped behind a tree and hid. When I saw that he was facing away I quickly retraced my steps and took a long, roundabout way home to make sure I wouldn't have to confront him. Looking back, I realize that on that Wednesday of Holy Week, the comfortable,

serene, unreflective and carefree bubble in which I lived got breached. For the first time in my life, the orthodox, religious doctrine I was mindlessly absorbing was in serious conflict with my own lived experience. It wasn't the last time.

I know you don't want me to rehash the election. I don't want to either, except to say that I was not only dismayed at the results, but really discouraged by the level of bigotry, racism, xenophobia and prejudice that surfaced during the campaign. It took the wind out of my sails and, to some extent, is still doing so. Have we really made so little progress in our lifetime? Seeing the news stories with the *alt right* group raising their arms in the Nazi salute (just a few blocks from the White House!) made me vomit!

Thank God, I've learned a few strategies over the years to avoid being engulfed by sadness and anger and depression. Choosing one's attitude is rarely easy in difficult times but it sure helps if you can pull it off. The day after seeing that ghastly neo-Nazi salute I was attempting to create some order on my very messy desktop. And I came across something I'd clipped many months before, a quote from Fred Rogers, whom we all knew as Mister Rogers, the kind and gentle T.V. host who welcomed us to his neighborhood.

When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers - so many caring people in this world.

I've been taking his advice. Every time I see another distressing story about where we're headed, I try to balance that with reminders about the marvelous caring people I've been so privileged - and BLESSED! - to know. Some of them went home to God this year. Others, some of whom have gotten old like me and some who are still aglow with the bloom of youth, work every day to make this a more caring and just world. I thank God for them today and urge you to do the same. Let me mention one. My friend Lillian Chur went home to God a few months ago. This petite dynamo was a widowed, retired school teacher. She was one of the "founding mothers" of Loaves & Fishes at the Newman Center in Berkeley. along with a legendary helper, my friend Ellen Cianciarulo. Twice every weekend *for years* Lillian got up in the middle of the night to go prepare a hot breakfast for homeless women and children at the Berkeley shelter. You can be sure those pearly gates swung wide open when Lillian arrived in the fast track lane!

On Saturday night, Christmas Eve, when we Christians will have finished lighting our Advent Wreath candles, our Jewish sisters and brothers will be lighting their first Hanukkah candle. My most fond wish and prayer this holiday season is that together we will work and fight, in solidarity, to keep on sharing light to push back the darkness!

With lots of love from the City of Saint Francis!