

Christmas Eve 2004

Jamaica Plain, December 24, 2004, Rev. Terry Burke

"God bless us every one." I had a close friend, George Burrows, a long-time social justice activist, who well into his eighties would write an annual Christmas letter that always ended with Tiny Tim's line from Dickens. Though we hear the story many times in the holiday season, there is still something moving about the hard-hearted Scrooge who, visited by ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, becomes a human being, caring about others, and keeping the Spirit of Christmas.

I have one sibling, an older brother named Tim. So the "Christmas Carol" evokes memories of Christmas Past for me. The Burke family Christmases in Flint, Michigan, like Gaul, were divided into three parts. Our celebration on the morning of Christmas Day was just for our family, with presents and red and green pancakes, made by my father. Then we hurried off to gather with my mother's family in the afternoon. However, I have the strongest memories of Christmas Eve's spent with my father's family.

We'd arrive at my Aunt Catherine and Aunt Helen's home on Dewey Street, a solid old Sears Roebuck house. Under Catherine's baby grand piano would be piles and piles of presents. My brother and I would try to crawl under the piano to guess what was in them. My father's parents, Anthony and Anna, had six children, but only three grandchildren. So my brother Tim, cousin Jim and I were the little princes, much doted on and hugged by aunts and uncles.

When we'd enter the house out of the bitter Michigan winter, it would be tropically warm. My aunts kept the thermostat at about 85 degrees out of concern for their sickly mother. I'd keep shedding layers of clothing and finally be running around in my "T" shirt. My father would try to surreptitiously turn down the thermostat, but it would always be turned back up by my aunts.

Before we could open all those inviting presents, we had to eat dinner. We ate at a great wooden table with heavy wood chairs. I remember having to sit on numerous phone books when little. My cousin Jim remembers borsht soup with the wonderful mixing colors of red beet soup and sour cream; I remember more the elaborate ceremonial around eating Aunt Catherine's famous mushroom soup. Once seated for dinner, the telephone would ring. People would always call during dinner to extend Christmas greetings.

Throughout the evening, the siblings would banter and bicker and kid around. Second generation Americans, they had survived the Great Depression, though they had lost one home, and the Second World War, where my Uncle Hank had fought in the Christmas time Battle of the Bulge. They were simply glad to be together and enjoy each other's company.

Always a part of my life, they seemed ageless. One year, when I was finishing divinity school, I tried to take a flight home from Logan, only to arrive at the airport on the morning of the 24th to find my flight to Detroit canceled. I finally found a way home by flying to Newark, where I waited for hours in a cafeteria, then flying to Philadelphia, then Detroit, and finally home to Flint. When I arrived at 9:30PM, my father begged me to put in a brief appearance at the Christmas Eve party. I was exhausted from a day of traveling, and with the stubbornness of youth decided I should make my own decision and not go. It was a mistake I would regret; life and church work intervened, and I never made it to another Christmas Eve party, though I would telephone the house and talk to everybody.

My relatives are pretty much all gone now. However, on Christmas Eve, through the gift of my memories, they are young and healthy and kidding around. May we make room in the inns of our hearts for those memories, painful and joyful, of Christmases past, and may they remind us how precious are those we care about and those we love this Christmas present.

