

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, December 28, 2016

Last Tuesday, as we stopped to shop at the Chinoe Kroger's, we were greeted by the sound of Christmas music resounding over the parking lot. I scanned the parking lot to see from whence the music came and spotted the source: a tall, handsome African-American young man was manning the Salvation Army kettle and playing Christmas music on a silver flugelhorn.



I watched as people passed him going in and out of the store. Several, as they dropped in their coins or folded paper money, spoke to him, complimenting him on his offering.

Seeing him took me back to my Salvation Army bell ringer days. I was a bell ringer each Christmas season for the Kiwanis Club I belonged to in Cave Creek, AZ. Jim and John, the two kindly souls who co-chaired the bell ringing committee made a valiant effort every year to recruit volunteers, but in a club where I was among the youngest members, it was tough going.

Many of the members begged off by saying, "I'm too old to stand for two hours at a time." When offered a chair, they replied, "I don't want to sit there and have people think I'm too old to stand for two hours."

Others declined saying, "It's too cold to stand out there for two hours." Mind you, cold in December on an Arizona afternoon meant the 50's. Jim and John would tell them to bundle up, only to hear, "My blood's gotten thin living out here."

Still others demurred when shown our ringer regalia that included a red vest with the Salvation Army logo on it, a Santa hat, and the requisite bell. Several of our members harrumphed at the outfit, saying they wouldn't want to be seen in public wearing such a get-up for fear "Somebody will recognize me." To which Jim and John would ask, "And what's wrong with someone recognizing you are giving your time to raise some money for the cold, homeless, and hungry?" To which they received no response other than a shake of the head: *No*.

Bottom line: Jim and John had a hard time each year fielding a bell-ringing team. After the too-old, too-cold, too-dignified-to-wear-a-Santa-hat excuses were rendered, there were only a handful of us left to volunteer.

Nancy was one. Pushing eighty and pushing a walker for mobility, Nancy did not fit in at a club made up primarily of retired white-collar executives (and a couple preachers). Nancy was a retired elementary school teacher who was experiencing the onset of dementia. Her adult children, who lived in distant parts of the country, were alienated from their mother for reasons unknown to me. Divorced many decades ago from their father, she lived in a small ranch house in an iffy neighborhood in north central Phoenix and made a twenty-mile commute to where our club met for lunch on Wednesdays.

As she scooted her walker toward first one table and then another, she would be met with, "Sorry, Nancy, that chair is taken." People can be so mean.

On more Wednesdays than not, Nancy would end up at the table I would end up at, the one for the guys (We had only a few women members) who were either new or outside the long-established cliques. Due to our having lunch so regularly, Nancy eventually visited and then joined our congregation.

Several times, Nancy and I were paired as bell ringers, she at one door and I at the other. I'd bring or find a folding chair for her, set it up at the entrance door (which was closer to the restroom), wrap a blanket around her legs and lap, plop a Santa hat on her head, and hand her a bell. I'd then stroll down to the exit door and take my place, hat on head, bell in hand. So it was for our two-hour shifts, the improbable duo-- a beanpole Santa and a seated Santa with a walker parked by her chair-- ringing in the coins and folded bills for neighbors in need.

I hadn't thought about Nancy until I heard the man at the Chinoe Kroger's ringing his Salvation Army bell and playing his flugelhorn.

I don't know if she is still attending that Kiwanis Club. If she is, I wonder who she is sitting with. Nor do I know if she is still attending Coolwater Christian Church. I doubt very much that the relationships between she and her children have been mended. I wonder how her physical and mental health is and who is checking in on her to see if she is all right.

When you stop and think about it, that was quite a ragtag collection of humanity at the manger that first Christmas, what with blue collar shepherds, heavenly host, livestock, and the Holy Family. Funny, but I can imagine Nancy fitting in that bunch a whole lot easier than I can see her fitting in at a lot of clubs, civic organizations... and even churches. Though there may be no place for such as Nancy at an executive table, I give thanks she and I met midweek at a lunch table, on Sundays at the Lord's Table, and for a couple afternoons each December as Santa's helpers.

Heading into Kroger's, I pulled out two bills, one for me and one for Nancy, creased them neatly, and slid them into the slot on the flugelhorn Santa's kettle.