

A Favorite Christmas Story

Toys for Tots, Toy for Joy, The Salvation Army. Every year at Christmas time, these charities join with others to make the holiday a memorable occasion for all children. Commitment from volunteers and donations from the public make it possible for the neediest children to have some of the gifts that traditionally accompany that holiday.

Charles Dickens told the most familiar story of the holiday spirit in *A Christmas Carol*, but a different story of bygone Christmas stays in my memory as a defining tale of the spirit of Christmas. It is just a few pages from a volume I found in an old bookstore, *Recollections of a Missionary in the Great West*. It tells a memorable story of one man's gifts to needy children. It happened in another place and another century, but it is so touching that I like to pass it along.

The story-teller writes about his encounter on Christmas day with a pioneer family late in the 19th century. Their lack of life's necessities was extreme, and the 6 year old daughter and 5 year old son knew they would not "have any Christmas this year.... Last year mother made us some potato men, but this year potatoes are so scarce that we couldn't have 'em."

The pastor states: "My heart went out to them. Children and no Christmas gifts!

"Only the chill, bare room, the wretched, meager meal. I ransacked my brain. Finally something occurred to me. After dinner I excused myself and hurried back to the church. There were two baskets there which were used for the collection – old, but rather pretty. I selected the best one. Fortunately I had in my grip a neat little 'housewife' which contained a pair of scissors, a huge thimble, needles, thread, a tiny little pincushion, an emery bag, buttons, etc. I emptied the contents into the collection-basket, and garnished the dull little affair with the bright ribbon ties ripped off the housewife, and went back to the house.

"To the boy I gave my penknife, which happened to be nearly new, and to the girl the church basket with the sewing-things for a work-basket. The joy of those children was one of the finest things I have ever witnessed. The face of the little girl was positively filled with awe as she lifted from the basket, one by one, the pretty and useful articles the housewife had supplied, and when I added the small box of candy that my children had provided me, they looked at me with feelings of reverence, almost as a visible incarnation of Santa Claus."

The hardships in today's world are different from those of a pioneer farm family, though they are just as real to young children in difficult family situations. We may not witness the awe in their faces, but by dropping coins or bills into the Salvation Army kettle or sending a donation to Toy for Joy and giving just a bit from our bounty, each one of us can add to the Christmas of a child in need. Merry Christmas!