

By Deb Richardson-Moore

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Third Sunday of Advent

Romans 8: 28

Prayer: Dear God, we are grateful for this beautiful sanctuary in which to worship you, and grateful for these talented musicians to inspire and lead us in that worship. We never tire of the story of how you came to be born and live among us. We pray in the name you wore, the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

Triune Traditions

I suppose every family with children has the tradition of visiting Santa Claus at this time of year.

Many years ago, when I was writing for *The Greenville News*, I came up with a story idea for interviewing Santa – from the perspective of children. So I went to a class at Stone Elementary and asked the children what they'd like to ask Santa.

They gave me great questions: *Who was his favorite reindeer?*

How did he get to all those houses on Christmas Eve?

How many elves did he have?

That night at dinner, I mentioned that I'd be taking all those questions to Santa the next day. My youngest child Madison, who was 6, got all excited. "Mom, you've got to take me!"

I said, "Well, you've already visited Santa and told him what you want for Christmas. This is an interview for the newspaper."

"I don't care," she said. "Please take me."

So I did. The next day we went to Santa's dressing room, deep in the bowels of Haywood Mall. And Madison sat there wide-eyed and quiet while Santa answered all those questions from the kids at Stone Elementary. Finally, he turned to Madison and said, "Is there anything you wanted to ask? You can sit on my knee if you want to."

Madison looked at me, and I nodded. But I whispered, "Questions only!"

So she climbed up onto Santa's lap and here was her question:

“Santa, did you remember that I want a bicycle?”

Every church, too, has its Advent and Christmas traditions. It's fun to add things – like the Straw in the Manger we added this year.

Our choir member Bronwyn White is an artist who has made nativity scenes for some of our people getting housing this Christmas. She wants that to become a tradition.

But our longest running tradition is our sanctuary tree. I pause every year during Advent to explain what it means. So many of you will have heard all of this before. That's the very definition of tradition.

The tree was created for us nine years ago by a former neighbor of mine, Daphne Brown. She calls it our Romans 8:28 tree.

Here's what Paul wrote to the Romans in 8:28: **“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”**

All the gift boxes on the tree started out as discarded cigar boxes. They were thrown away. Useless boxes, no longer wanted or needed.

But of course, cigar boxes carry a very strong smell of cigars. So inside each box is an inexpensive dryer sheet to absorb the smell.

The boxes then got a wrapping of fabric remnants – purchased for ten cents a pound because they weren't big enough to cover a sofa or a chair or even a pillow.

And then on top of the fabric are pieces of broken and discarded jewelry – broken watches, necklaces that couldn't be repaired, earrings that have lost a mate.

That's our theme. Empty, discarded vessels. Fabric pieces sold cheap because they weren't big enough to make something. Broken, discarded jewelry. But look at what they became!

The idea, Daphne said, is that “God takes us with all our stinking habits, poor choices, painful experiences and brokenness, and promises to ... make something good and beautiful and purposeful.”

“.... (A)ll things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Our tree also contains the baby Jesus, though after nine years he's a little the worse for wear. When we unwrapped him last year, we found that most of his crown was broken off. So we took him to the art room and got our artists to spruce him up.

On the left of the baby Jesus is a garnet scarf, symbolizing the blood he would shed for us 33 years later. On his right is a green scarf, symbolizing everlasting life.

Two crosses flank him, representing the crosses on which two thieves were crucified alongside him. As they hung there, one sneered at him and one chose to follow him. All these centuries later, we are faced with that same choice.

The tree also contains a vine which grew out of John 15: Jesus said, **“I am the true vine, and my father is the vinegrower. He removes**

every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” (John 15: 1-2)

When we follow him, we bear fruit. When we follow him, people see our fruit. They see it through our words, our actions, our practice, our acts of kindness that pile straw into our manger.

Our Romans 8: 28 tree is not just a pretty decoration for the holidays. It is another way in which we worship.

We talk about the written word, the spoken word, the sung word, the painted word. In our tree we have the salvaged word, a visual representation of how God takes our lives, our mistakes, our brokenness, our suffering and re-creates them according to his purpose.

Our theology is reflected in every branch of this tree – even in the lights that don’t work.

As we journey through Advent, I am pleased to have these reminders, these symbols, that reflect who we are. Our tree tells a story – a

story about how we serve a God who created us, and who, when necessary, can re-create us.

If we are unhappy with who we are, if we are unhappy with *where* we are, now is the time to make that change. We know God can rebuild us from the inside out. How many times have we seen that happen here?

Being lost and broken, being addicted and homeless, being unemployed and ashamed, or on the other side, being self-centered and self-absorbed, are all parts of the human condition. But like these discarded cigar boxes that are now precious parts of our Christmas tree, we are all precious members of God's kingdom. And each of you is a precious member of our family.

Two years ago, as we were putting up the tree, Don sent a young man over to help. He was doing community service work, which means he'd been assigned by Drug Court or Pre-Trial Intervention to work here instead of doing jail time.

Some of our community service workers are enthusiastic and fun to have around. And some try to hide and talk on their cell phones. When we catch those, we send them home.

Well this young man worked, but he was sullen. He looked completely put out with being here.

But on his next to last day, Don assigned him to help Douglas and Pat and Cheri and Linda and me put up the tree. It's a chore to get it from the basement and set up securely and tied to the wall. But I kept telling him, *Just wait 'til you see the final result.*

Well, we were laughing as we always do when we put up this tree. That baby Jesus weighs 30 pounds if he weighs an ounce.

Cheri was looking online for new decorations, because she's the queen of bling.

We were pondering why that manger scene has 101 figures.

And we pulled this young man into the silliness and spirit of decorating. He warmed up a little, and became more cooperative and more helpful.

So after the three mangers were set up, and the tree was lit and decorated, and the packages arranged, I asked him, *Was I right? What do you think?*

And he said, "I think you all love each other."

That's our final Triune tradition.

If you would like to invite God to cover you with his love just as Daphne covered these cigar boxes with fabric and jewels, you may come to the altar and pray this morning while we sing the songs on our insert.

Let us proclaim with every word and every note, **".... (A)ll things work together for good for those who love God..."**

Amen.