

## Reunions at Christmas (a tablecloth unites a couple after many years)

I think about families like ours gathering together at Christmas. It's one of my favorite things about the season. Every time I hear a story of a Christmas reunion, it just melts my heart. My friend's pastor told this story to his congregation last Christmas. I've tried to track down the provenance of the story but it's been told and retold so many times, the origin seems to have been lost in the retelling. Some say it was originally written by a man named Howard C. Schade. Whether the account is true or not, we never tire of hearing stories of unforgettable reunions at Christmas.

In the autumn of 1954 a young pastor and his wife moved to Brooklyn to take his first church assignment. Instead of coming to a thriving congregation, he had nothing but a dilapidated church building that had been closed for a long time. He didn't mind but jumped into the work, setting Christmas Eve as his goal for reopening the neighborhood church. He and his wife cleaned floors, plastered walls, sanded and stained pews, and painted until late every night. The work was grueling but their enthusiasm made the hours pass quickly. Christmas was approaching and they finished four days early.

That night, as they locked the building, it started to sprinkle. Over the next two days the rain never let up. The pastor kept looking out at the trees bending in the torrential downpour, wondering if the slate on the roof would hold.

As soon as the storm abated he walked over to the church, praying that there'd be no damage. When he unlocked the door, the sag of his shoulders revealed his discouragement. With one glance he could see that, just as he feared, the roof had leaked. Water had run down the wall behind the pulpit, softening the new plaster enough so that huge chunks of plaster and lath had fallen off the wall onto the floor. He got the broom and dustpan and managed to clean up the sodden mess, but there was nothing that could be done about the gaping hole above the pulpit. There couldn't have been a worse place for this to happen than right over the altar. Should they postpone the first service? He hated the idea of missing the celebration of the Lord's birth, especially since they'd been inviting people from all over the Brooklyn neighborhood.

On his way home he stepped inside the secondhand store, thinking he may as well remove the handbill announcing the service from the window. Spread across a table, however, an ivory crocheted tablecloth caught his eye. In the center was a cross, crocheted in a delicate fillet stitch. As he lifted a corner, he could tell it was big enough to cover the entire missing patch of plaster in the church. Without hesitation, he bought the tablecloth. The owner folded it and wrapped it in brown paper tied with twine.

As the pastor walked back toward the church he watched an elderly woman dart from a doorway toward a bus pulling away from the curb. "It looks like you've missed the bus," he said. "The next one won't be along for forty-five minutes."

The woman pulled her coat around her.

"I'm just going over to the church to do one last thing before our Christmas Eve service. It's nice and warm in there. Would you like to come wait inside?"

The woman mumbled a shy thanks and followed him, slipping into the last pew.

The pastor got out the ladder and his hammer, nailing a line of brads evenly along the wall above the hole in the plaster. He gingerly placed the tablecloth over the nails, easing them through the openwork of the crochet. He forgot all about the woman until she spoke.

"Sir," she said in a hushed voice, "where did you get that tablecloth?"

He told her, pointing toward the secondhand store.

“Look in the lower right-hand corner,” she said as he moved toward the front. “Are the initials EBG worked into the border?”

He came down off the ladder and looked. Sure enough, there were the initials. “How did you know?”

“I made that tablecloth thirty-five years ago in Austria. See how large it is? We had a table that held our entire family—parents, uncles, aunts, children.” She wiped a hand across her cheek. “Gone. ALL gone.”

“Gone?” The pastor didn’t understand.

“When the Nazis came, my husband told me to leave. There was no time to take anything. He was to follow me a week later, but I was captured by the SS and taken to a camp.”

“Taken to a camp?” The pastor sat down.

“I never saw any of them again.”

“Let me get the tablecloth down for you,” he said, moving toward the ladder.

No. No. You keep it. Look at how beautiful it is here in the dim light of your church.”

The woman was right. The tablecloth added texture and design to the wall. It was much more interesting than the smooth plaster had been. He knew it would be even more beautiful in candlelight. “Let me go home and get my car. My wife and I will drive you home.”

The women agreed. She lived in Staten Island and had come to Brooklyn only to clean a house that day. The pastor kept thinking about how unlikely it was that she’d have been in their church on that very day to see her own handiwork from a life long gone. Coincidence? Both he and his wife just kept shaking their heads.

Christmas Eve dawned cold and clear. By evening snowflakes had begun to swirl, but the pastor was delighted to see the little church nearly full. The scent of candles, the sound of bells, and the strains of ancient carols filled the sanctuary.

After the service, people filed out into the night. The pastor noticed an old man still sitting in the pew. He’d seen him in the neighborhood, always alone. The pastor sat down beside him, thinking he needed a kind word or two on this lonely night.

“That tablecloth,” the man said, pointing a shaking finger toward the altar. “My wife made that tablecloth. I can still remember her working on it during the long winter nights in Austria.”

“Your wife?” The pastor sat stunned.

“Yes. She fled Austria just before the occupation. I was to follow, but I was arrested and taken to prison.” The man put his head in his hands and wept. “I never saw her again.”

The pastor motioned to his wife to come over. “We’re going for a ride.” He turned toward the man. “I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

The man seemed happy for the diversion. They drove in silence, watching the snow dance in the headlights. When they arrived at the woman’s apartment building, they helped the man walk up the three flights to the woman’s apartment. They knocked on the door. As it opened, they saw a reunion the likes of which they knew they would never see again.

Debbie Macomber, *One Simple Act (Discovering the Power of Generosity)*, Howard Books, New York, 2009  
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