

Hold Them Close  
A 1st Sunday of Christmastide Homily on 12/27/2015  
Rev. W. Dale Osborne

The piece of music Mike just played so beautifully is one of my favorite meditative songs for this season of Christmastide. When I listen to its hauntingly peaceful melody I am transported to 1965. For it was in December of 1965 that many of us heard the piece for the first time as it brought us face to face and ear to ear and heart to heart with the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. I do not know if Charles M. Schultz, the creative genius who brought us the Peanuts comic strip, had any idea how fascinatingly connective his 23 minute cartoon for television would become. But he seems to have gotten it right. Hearing the meaning of Christmas story told by a 7 year old named Linus continues to be a benchmark for sincerity, genuine love and playful joy. The spotlight hits Linus on the stage and you can imagine he is trying to hold Charlie Brown's question "What does Christmas really mean?", close to his heart.

The season of Christmas encourages all of us to hold each other close. It's images remind us of how the human condition is best lived out when people are willing to hold one another close in an embrace of true love. Mary holds her baby close to her breast as she feeds Jesus for the first time in a stable. The angels held the shepherds close in spirit as they reported news of Great Joy to all the world. Joseph must have held Mary close when she was thrust into a role as mother to incarnate love found in the Christ-child.

We are encouraged to hold one another close just as Mary and Joseph and countless other practitioners of faithful love have done throughout biblical and earthly history. Think of the story we heard from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel today. In it we find vivid examples of how much a parent longs to hold their loved one close whenever separation occurs. Remember this mother Hannah who had been the barren and perhaps mournful first wife of Elkanah. Hannah had prayed fervently for a child when she worshipped in the temple at Shiloh. When her prayers are answered and little Samuel is born and eventually weaned, she fulfills her promise to dedicate her only son as a servant of the Lord. So Samuel goes far from her to train under the leadership of Eli at the

temple. Oh how Hannah and Elkanah must have missed their little boy. For almost the entirety of every year, Hannah is separated physically from her precious son. What does she do when she is unable to hold him literally in her arms? Hannah finds a way to lovingly and figuratively hold little Samuel by sewing for him a special robe called an ephod year after year. As each stitch of thread is brought together she must be thinking of her child, the answer to her prayers. When she takes the robe to her son at the temple year after year, she tenderly places it on his shoulders and back. Perhaps stroking his growing shoulders and arms as he wears it for the first time. Her ability to hold Samuel close in her physical arms is far too brief for any parent who loves their child. But while she is back in her home town, she is comforted by knowing that every day he wears the robe close to his skin. The cloth that Hannah created is holding Samuel close day by day until the next time their hands are able to touch and the two of them are then able to hold each other close in a way that every parent desires to embrace their child.

The separation of time and space is difficult when loved ones long to be together. That is one of the poignant joys of Christmas. Many of us are grateful to see our loved ones again after being separated for perhaps a year by a great distance. Christmas brings us together to not only share the Christian celebration “Christus natus est!”, Christ is born!, but to also share the loving embrace of a family member or longsuffering friend. When we are reunited, we are compelled by love to hold them close once again. We know in reality though that many loved ones are not able to hold their child or spouse or grandparent, parent or beloved friend close at Christmas. Too many are separated by oceans, continents, wars, death, tension, pain, incarceration or indifference. Too many are constrained by tears at Christmas because someone close to them is absent and deeply missed. For their separation, we can indeed be prayerful and offer a compassionate ear.

Today, we can also be boldly and physically present to them in much the same way that Hannah was present to little Samuel. I want to close my homily today by encouraging us to hold someone close until everyone in this sanctuary who is able and willing has had a chance to be held close. (I explain the methodology of this sacred touch)

Thanks be to God for Hannah and Mary and everyone who is tenderly missing someone they long to hold close in this season of Christmas.