

December 24, 2006  
Christmas Eve

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

There's an elephant in the room. In case you're not familiar with this saying, when someone says there's an elephant in the room it means there is an unspoken reality, often an awkward reality, that everyone knows about and yet no one is mentioning. And, it is absurd that no one is mentioning it, just as it would be absurd if there really was an elephant in the room and no one mentioned it. And if you haven't experienced the cliché before, I would guess that perhaps you're experiencing it even now, at this Christmas Eve service.

And so, I'm going to mention the elephant in this room, or to make the reference more seasonal, the elephant under the tree, tonight. That's right, I think it's time for the people of Suttons Bay Congregational Church to deal with an age old issue that affects every church at this time of year and yet no one talks about it—or if they do it's just to make jokes. And so let's just lay it all out of the table tonight—I'm talking about CREAMSTERS. Now some of you are CREAMSTERS. What's a CREAMSTER? A CREAMSTER is someone who only comes to church on Christmas and Easter. And if you're one of them, you know who you are. And if you aren't one of them, if you're a REGULAR, you know who they are, too. They are the people who you found sitting in “your” pew when you came in tonight. They are the people who fumbled around with the hymnal trying to find the right page number in an unfamiliar book. They are the people who don't pledge or serve on committees and yet come waltzing in here twice a year as if they belong, coming when it's convenient for them making it crowded for the REGULARS.

And the CREAMSTERS, what you must be thinking and feeling right now. Someone in my Toastmasters group recently confessed that it had been so long since she'd been to church that she was afraid the holy water would boil if she returned. Well, good news CREAMSTERS, we don't have holy water in the Congregational Church so you're good. I've also heard some CREAMSTERS say how guilty they feel for not being in church every Sunday, and yet I know many of you have to work on Sundays or your kids have sporting events on Sundays and so that's why you're not here. Maybe some of you just aren't in the rhythm of getting up for church on Sunday morning and yet you couldn't imagine Christmas being Christmas without holding a candle and singing Silent Night at a Christmas Eve service. And others of you CREAMSTERS may be struggling with your faith and you just can't buy what happens here fifty-two weeks out of the year but you'll come a couple of times to hedge your bets, hoping that maybe something big and magical will happen this time that will inspire you to return week after week, year after year, just like the REGULARS do.

But here's the thing about Christmas Eve, or any other eve or morning for that matter, it does not belong to us—the REGULARS or the CREAMSTERS. No one's got the upper hand here, we all need this baby to arrive in this manger tonight—whether we are here once a week every week for choir practice or whether we had never stepped through those doors until this night. Jesus doesn't play favorites, God doesn't take sides—this gift is for all of us. Because, we all need this gift. We all hurt and grieve. We all yearn for acceptance and love. We all have regrets and make mistakes and wish for a new start, a fresh beginning—and that's the gift we're all getting

tonight whether we're old or young, married or single, rich or just barely getting by, a CREAMSTER or a REGULAR. We all need this gift—it's one size fits all.

And frankly, the gift of the Christ Child isn't the only gift we're receiving tonight—tonight we're also receiving the gift of each other. I know it sounds a little hokey, but it's Christmas Eve, a night ripe for sounding hokey--with a man in a red suit, flying deer, a baby laid down for a nap in what was really a great big animal food dish. Come on this night is ripe for hokey and so I boldly declare, we are a gift to each other, and, just like every other aspect of this night, there's nothing hokey about it. Rather, it's an awe-inspiring, life-changing gift just as are our childhood memories of Christmas morning, the belief that reindeer really can fly, and a king the ranks of which this world has never known being laid down to rest in a manger. We are a gift to each other. CREAMSTERS, you are a gift to us because you did take up our pews, which are now your pews, and so we're getting to see the service from a different angle. You are a gift to us because we love to see this place filled to the gills and each one of you fills those gills just as much as each one of us. And CREAMSTERS, you are a gift to us because you made the effort to be here—and it must have taken courage to walk through those doors into a sea of unfamiliar faces and we find that inspiring and it fills us with the hope that perhaps your life was changed a little bit for the better because you were here and we hope you'll come back and consider being a part of this church family again.

And to the REGULARS, you are a gift to us because of your faithful commitment to God and this church, without you, none of us would be here. And REGULARS you are a gift to us because you've seen the ups and downs of life and still you come, week after week, year after year, with hope and belief that God's dominion will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And REGULARS you are a gift to us because you are our family—long term or just adopted for a night—and despite the fact that you might have been frustrated that your pew was taken—you smiled at us, you welcomed us, and we see the light of the Christ Child reflected in your faces.

Ah, now doesn't that feel better—the elephant is out from under the tree and has left the building. And all that's remains in its place is this little baby lying in a manger—a gift for you and me—for CREAMSTERS and REGULARS—indeed a gift for all Creation so that on this night—if not on all of our nights—we might know the peace, joy, hope, and love that God intends for us. Thanks be to God that Jesus is here and each one of you is here, too.