

It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas---oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it- overspending... the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma---the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way. Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly black. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids--all kids--and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition---one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on. The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

May we all remember Christ, who is the reason for the season, and the true Christmas spirit this year and always. God bless.

Greeters for the following Sundays:

Regular Morning Greeters

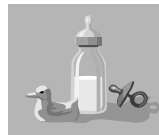


Dec. 4 Brandon & Heidi Meyer
 Dec. 11 John & Harriet Ruschen
 Dec. 18 Scott & Sara Hankel
 Dec. 25 Phil & Ruby Graves
 Jan. 1 Troy & Deb Meyer

Guest Greeters

Dec. 4 Ron & Colette Grussing
 Dec. 11 Cordell & Lucille Wubben
 Dec. 18 Phil & Ruby Graves

Nursery Attendants:



Dec. 4 AM Ruby Graves, Lillie & Damon
 AM Deb & Emma Meyer
 PM Hollie Hovland
 Dec. 11 AM Stacy & Kalley Schwitters, Dani
 AM Jean Santjer, Nicole W.
 PM Kay Hillers
 Dec. 18 AM Sarah Schwitters, Kennedy B. &
 Ryan B.
 AM Angie & Ethan Brouwer
 PM Sara Hankel
 Dec. 25 AM Tammy, Kate & Logan Hillers
 AM Jo Ammermann, Micah P.
 Jan. 1 AM Pety, Tiffany & Stephanie Z.
 AM Kim Hillers, Taylor T.
 PM Barb Bohlsen

Children's Church:



Dec. 4 Jo Ammermann, Ethan B.
 Jina Ruschen, Kennedy B.
 Dec. 11 Tammy Hillers, Damon G.
 Heidi Meyer, Noah W.
 Dec. 18 Sue Gerdes, Noah P.
 Kay Hillers, Lucas S.
 Dec. 25 Kim Brouwer, Braden R.
 Troy Meyer, Mason B.
 Jan. 1 Christy Groen, Taylor T.
 Angie Brouwer, Logan H.

Hymn Sing:



Dec. 4 Cordell Wubben
 Dec. 11 Ron Grussing
 Dec. 18 Mark & Darla Fischer
 Dec. 25
 Jan. 1

Library:



Dec. 4 Angie & Missy
 Dec. 11 Marcia & Stacy
 Dec. 18 Eileen & Joy
 Dec. 25 Closed
 Jan. 1 Closed



Ladies Aid

Ladies Aid will meet on Wednesday, December 7, at 10:00am for our annual Christmas party. Remember cards for your secret pal. There will be a special offering for Friendship Ministries. Also, remember your gifts for Hope Pregnancy Center

Youth Ministry Minute

We ended the month of November with a combined area youth group worship night at Unity. Both JAM and Jr. JAM attended as we worshipped through ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication). It was a great night of worship and fellowship!!

We want to thank the congregation for supporting our wreath sales!! This year's sales went really well! We want to thank you for your part in providing resources for the students to go on SERVE next summer.

Merry Christmas from JAM and Jr. JAM!!

Notes from the Shepherding Elders

We met with the Admin. Elders for devotions on November 16. Daryl read from James 1: 19-27 and opened with prayer.

- The September minutes were reviewed for information.
- Youth Director report received by way of written report.
- New Business: Garrett and Rick Marker are attending the Leadership Development Network thru Classis Lake Superior. Pastor Bob is mentoring them.
- Sermon/Service evaluations.
- Elder District reports: Several visits were noted.
- Pastor's report: Pastor Bob reported on several visits and other activities that he was involved with. He led a new member's class for several individuals.
- Next meeting is Full Council on Dec. 7, 2011 @ 7:00pm
- Pastor Bob closed in prayer.

GEMS Bake Sale

We would like to invite you to come and support the GEMS through the Bake Sale that will take place on Monday, December 19 beginning at 6:15pm. This will be done prior to the annual congregational meeting.



We would love to do your Christmas baking for you. We will have a variety of goodies for you to choose from.

We look forward to seeing you on the 19th!



HOW TO OBSERVE THANKSGIVING

Count your blessings instead of your crosses; Count your gains instead of your losses.

Count your joys instead of your woes; Count your friends instead of your foes.

Count your smiles instead of your tears; Count your courage instead of your fears.

Count your full years instead of your lean; Count your kind deeds instead of your mean.

Count your health instead of your wealth; Count on God instead of yourself.