

Christmas Day
December 25, 2009

The Rev. Canon Catherine Nichols

We opened this Christmas Day celebration with the beloved hymn "O come All Ye Faithful" and the second to last verse, such a powerful verse, "Child, for us sinners poor, in the manger, we would embrace thee with love and awe. Who would not love thee, loving us so dearly? Oh come let us adore him! Who would not love thee, loving us so dearly? How couldn't we love you, child Jesus, for your love for us is infinite, it's so embracing, it's so complete." On this Christmas morning I want to tell you a story of love, a true story, a story about someone those of us who are members of Trinity know -- our own Bob Blakeley. Bob always sits on the left aisle about half-way down, right about there and many of you won't know that Bob has been very, very ill. He was recently in the intensive care unit at the V.A. Hospital and he was in that ICU for eight days. I hasten to tell you that as of a few days ago, Bob is home, he's much better, he's recuperating, but he's not well enough yet to be back in church. He would be mortified if I were telling this story when he were here, but I have permission to tell the story. While he was a patient in the ICU, one of his nurses wrote an email to all the ICU staff. I read you parts of it: "Hello everyone", she wrote, "I just wanted to take a moment to share a story with you about the patient in room 15, Doctor Bob. He has his doctorate both in audiology and speech pathology. He worked at the child development and rehabilitation center at OHSU for over forty years. He has traveled all over the world volunteering to help kids with cleft palates so that they could have appliances built to help them speak, Doctor Bob", she went on, "is very special to me. He worked with my son, Jesse, for nineteen years. My Jesse was born with a very wide bilateral cleft lip and palate. Not only did Jesse have no internal structures for producing speech, he also had a neurological deficit in the oral motor planning pathway. The plastic surgeons grafted and grafted and grafted, trying to build the necessary structures for speech for Jesse. Time after time they were unsuccessful and when Jesse was eight years old, they gave up, but Doctor Bob was unwilling to give up on Jesse. He told me that with Jesse's high IQ and profound reading disability as well as his oral motor problems, he was convinced that Jesse needed speech; so Doctor Bob found a semi-retired prosthodontist, a dentist who makes adaptive appliances for people and Doctor R who worked at OHSU joined Doctor Bob. We set up a meeting and Doctor Bob and Doctor R began to work together -- a prosthodontist and a speech pathologist have to work in combination to build the appropriate appliance. As the dentist builds the appliance which is designed to mimic the natural structures missing in the mouth, the speech pathologist has to evaluate the sounds of different letters. Together they figure out where to adjust the appliance to fit that particular patient's anatomy. Doctor Bob was convinced that together he and Doctor R could help Jesse speak. The two of them volunteered their time for one year. They met with Jesse and me one or two times every week early in the morning before the doctors began their work day. They had a lab coat made to Jesse's size, eight year old Jesse and engaged him in any way they could. Jesse help mix the paste to make impressions of his mouth. He actually helped to build the appliance. They let him set the timer for when the mold would be finished. Jesse loved being involved in his own

treatment. Within three months Jesse was beginning to be able to articulate and within six months he was ninety per cent intelligible. After a year the plastic surgeon was able to study Jesse's built appliance and after a couple of different graft attempts, he was able to replace the appliance with permanent grafts, which allowed Jesse speech. Speech! Jesse is now twenty-three, nearly twenty-four. His speech is clear. He has obvious facial plastic surgery scars. He still has more plastic surgeries to go. As far as I'm concerned', the nurse went on, "we're blessed with greatness having Doctor Bob among us. He's a perpetual humanitarian who still volunteers time with cleft kids at the age of eighty-five. He's been published multiple times and has as you can imagine some very interesting stories to share". The nurse concludes "It's always a privilege to serve our veterans here, but Doctor Bob will always have a special place in my heart. He gave my son a voice." "Who would not love thee, loving us so dearly". Bob Blakeley loved Jesse and loved so dearly hundreds of other cleft kids as he calls them. How many similar examples of love we all experience in our lives and today on the day that love came into the world we're called to remember them. What a Holy response Doctor Bob gave to Jesus who loves us so dearly. Amen.