

As a boy growing up in Pendleton, Oregon my best friend was Mike Ledbetter. His family lived outside of town on a wheat ranch. When I was in third grade Mike invited me for an overnight. Part of our planned activities was to go trout fishing in the Blue Mountains. This was a big deal, because, although my father was in the Forest Service and hunted, he didn't really fish much. It would be a new experience for me, although I didn't want Mike or his Dad to know how clueless I was about fishing. Mike lived on a ranch and Mr. Ledbetter was a cool guy who did lots of outdoor things. I wanted to impress them.

When we got to the river that Saturday morning Mr. Ledbetter gave Mike and me each our own fishing rod as the party scattered up and down the riverbank. I can't swear to the details of what happened next. They're now cloudy in my memory. But the feelings they evoked are vivid and the reason I remember this incident from fifty years ago.

Let's just say things went badly wrong. My fishing pole took on a life of its own. After a few awkward casts I suddenly found that the reel

wouldn't work. It was all tangled up, and the more I tried to untangle it the worse it became. Pretty soon the line was coiled all around the outside of the reel and drooping everywhere. That's what I remember most -- staring at that reel with dread.

Somehow, I had wrecked Mr. Ledbetter's fishing pole! I panicked. How much would it cost to replace? What would Mr. Ledbetter think about me? I was ashamed. I stood exposed as an outdoor klutz. For a while I just kind of stood by myself, not wanting to let anyone know I had ruined the pole. But then Mr. Ledbetter came down the bank checking up on me. I couldn't hide anymore. I showed Mr. Ledbetter the tangled reel. He looked at it for a second and said something like, "Hmmm . . . that looks pretty tangled." All I could say was, "Yeah." Then he said, "I'll take this for a bit and work on it." And Mr. Ledbetter disappeared back up the river with my pole, while I was filled with relief just because he hadn't yelled at me.

This Christmas I want to talk about our tangled lives. Most of us tonight/today are living in lives and families that are all tangled up. Perhaps it's a divorce, or job loss, school trouble, relationships ending, health crises, money problems, our lies catching up with us -- or some other complication. But our life is messy and painful. Maybe we know how this all happened, maybe we don't. But either way we're stuck. We can't untangle the mess ourselves. I think here of my feelings while staring at my tangled reel on that riverbank.

That is what Christmas is all about. God came into time and space as one of us to untangle the mess that we human beings have made of our lives -- but can't undo. That's why the baby Jesus being born in that humble stable in Bethlehem is so important. He's our hope for a resolution to our messes. I think here of Mr. Ledbetter's appearing in the middle of my fear and troubles. And I was afraid of what he would say and think of me. Some of us are also afraid of what Jesus thinks of us, and what He might do to us as he looks at our tangled lives.

But Jesus isn't trying to catch us messing up. He wants us to be happy. We are meant to find joy in life beside the river. Jesus wants us to show and offer Him our tangled lives, and say, "Here, You take it and fix it for me. I don't know how." He wants us to hand over our lives to Him. It's the gift He wants more than gold, frankincense or myrrh. How many of us are trying to fix our own lives without God's help?

Today I would personally like to invite any of you who think you could use more of God's help in your lives to an event here at Holy Family in the coming days. Coming into church I hope you received a blue card like this (show). It gives the details of these events. -----

Christmas is not so much about presents, beautiful meals, or even family, as it's about remembering our dependency on a little child in a manger who loves each of us so much that He would die for us. Die for us: Jesus untangles our lives and hands them back to us through the cross He would eventually die on. You may think a tangled fishing reel is a joke, literally kid's play, compared to your own life's serious mess. But

all human problems and sins are child's play to Jesus. Do you think your problems are too big for Him? Give them to the Christ-child. He can deal with them as easily as an expert fisherman undoing a knotted reel.

Again, I think of Mr. Ledbetter. He took my fishing pole with him that morning to fix. I didn't really appreciate it at the time but looking back I realize he had to sacrifice some of his own day off and fishing time to clean up the mess this little kid had made. But he did it without complaint or comment. After, I don't know how long, I once again had a functioning fishing pole.

That's just how Jesus is. He doesn't begrudge us our salvation, or the death He paid for it. He just wants us to use well these lives He had given to us. And He'll fix them as necessary. Jesus is the great un-doer of Knots. The best gift we can give to Jesus on His birthday, is to give Him greater access to our lives. This Christmas let us not be afraid to hand Jesus our own tangled knot-of-a life. He'll hand it back with joy added, if we'll let Him.