

## Happy Birthday, Susie

Last week, while listening to Christmas music, I spent at least four hours wrapping Christmas presents. It can be a daunting task, but at the same time, it's a good time for reflection. I remembered how I used to do this every year with my sister, Susie. It was a time for us to visit, help each other wrap gifts for the other, and of course, listen to Christmas music. We would usually hide away in my bedroom with the door locked so my kids wouldn't barge in and catch us. It served as an escape for me as well. December 18 is Susie's birthday. She has been gone for five years now. It's so hard to believe it has been that long. I do miss her, very much.

I was thinking about one Christmas in particular. I believe it was in 1997, because it was the same year Princess Diana died. I adored Princess Diana, as so many others did. I tried to emulate how she cared for others and had started volunteering at a homeless shelter. I went to the shelter every week, trying to sort through their clothing closet, so others would be able to find clothing as needed. Looking back, I realized I had done this more for myself than in the name of service for God. I think I was seeking approval from the world more than anything else, and whenever we do this, we come up feeling empty.

I had been working at the shelter and as I was leaving, I passed a young woman who was sitting on the sidewalk with a box full of items she picked out from the shelter's closet. Something (Someone) told me to speak with her, so I turned to her and asked if she needed a ride. She said someone was supposed to be coming for her, but they hadn't shown. I told her I would be glad to give her a ride home. As we placed her box of items in my car, I noticed she had a Barbie doll and a few other odds and ends, besides clothes. I thought she must have a little girl.

As I drove, I tried to make small talk with this fragile looking young woman who wouldn't even look me in the eye. I asked her if she had any children, thinking of that Barbie doll, and was surprised when she said she didn't. I found out she was living alone with her father. When we arrived at her pitiful house, she insisted on carrying the box to the house herself. She didn't want me near her home, I assumed because her father was waiting inside. Of course, I thought the worst of this man who was probably watching our every move through a window.

I was still volunteering at the shelter by the time Christmas rolled around. My church welcomed the chance to donate presents for the children at the shelter. I knew Susie would be my go-to person to help me with wrapping. As we discussed our plans, I shared with her how I had given the young woman a ride that day, and how my heart just broke when I realized the Barbie doll in her box was most likely for herself. Perhaps she never received a doll while growing up? Maybe she was still just a child in her mind. All I know is I saw a great need and Susie and I decided together we would make Christmas happen for this young woman, and even her father, who we knew nothing about.

I bet Susie and I spent an entire day wrapping the gifts for the shelter, but we had the most fun wrapping the gifts for this young woman and her father. Nothing extravagant, but we did provide some clothing, gloves, things like that. I believe we gave the young woman a cute little stuffed animal as well. We wrapped things like peanut brittle and gloves for the dad. Susie received a canned ham from work, so we also picked up some additional groceries and sweets, that they might enjoy a little Christmas dinner. I believe it was Susie who brought home her desktop Christmas tree, so they could even have a little tree. We were absolutely giddy while preparing everything.

Susie helped me deliver the gifts to the shelter on a Saturday night. I want to say that act blessed me so much, but sadly, it didn't like I thought it would. I found many of the recipients to be, well, rude. The small children were very sweet, but there were some older kids that expressed how they didn't like this, or they didn't like that. My Princess Diana bubble popped that night. I know we did a good thing, but as often happens when we do things on our own merit, we come up wanting.

Susie didn't go to church much, so she wasn't with me when we delivered Christmas to my young friend and her father. After church, my family drove to the unwelcoming house. My husband came with me to the door, and no one answered to our knock. I tried a few times, but no one came to the door. We went ahead and left

a few boxes and bags and the little tree on the front porch and left. I was disappointed, but I still felt giddy about what we did.

I asked my husband to drive around the block and do a quick drive-by, just in case. Just as I had hoped, everything from the porch was gone! We weren't gone long enough for anyone else to have taken the items, so in my heart I knew the young woman and her dad would enjoy a little Christmas. I cannot begin to tell you the joy I felt in my heart. And what a contrast to the disappointment I felt the night before. I couldn't wait to get home to tell Susie what had happened. She and I both were so happy that they took everything inside. I will never forget that Christmas.

Every year when present wrapping time comes around, there is always an emptiness from not having my sister around to talk and laugh with while we wrap presents. But it is a 'good' emptiness if that's possible. I have such good memories of my big sister during this time of year. Susie had a big heart and a generous spirit when it came to giving to others. I tried to make her last birthdays memorable, because she had done so many kind things for me. I think she was pleased. I hope so, anyway. I have the Christmas ornaments I had given to her hanging on my tree now, just to keep her memory alive. Especially at Christmas. I miss you, my sister. Happy Birthday!

May God fill your hearts with the spirit of giving this Christmas. Oh yes, Happy Birthday, Jesus!

Blessings,

Lisa Jo

