

The Problem with the Nativity
A Christmas Eve Story, 2022
Matt Matthews

Pastor Bryan Cline had dealt with many church problems in 35-years of being a minister. But this problem with the nativity had upset him like no other.

For the last three years, baby Jesus kept getting stolen from the life-sized plastic nativity sitting under spot lights on the front lawn of the church. This year, Pastor Cline bought a small army of extra Jesuses—forty-eight, to be exact—and lined them up in the basement around the boiler and bags of sidewalk salt. After every theft, almost one a night, he'd replace the stolen Jesus with a new one.

And each day he tried securing baby Jesus in a foolproof way. He tried pinning the Messiah down with lawn stakes, screwing him onto a plywood base, and wiring him down.

Nothing worked.

That summer, the church had installed a security camera aimed at where the nativity would go. And each morning of these four weeks of Advent, an eager Pastor Cline and the church staff—the custodian, secretary, and organist—leaned into the computer monitor and watched all-too familiar footage from the night before. A masked person knelt reverently at the manger, pulled out the needed tool from his toolbox, and easily cut, unscrewed, or otherwise wrangled Jesus loose, tucked him under his arm, and walked off-camera.

The kidnapper wore dark green sweats, a mask, a toboggan hat, and gloves. He could be twelve-years-old, or 112. He could be a she. And he was good at what he did. He came prepared. He walked away with the prize in less than 15-seconds.

In early December, after the first six abductions, Pastor Cline invited the police chief over. The choir director brought a pot of tea, the custodian brought a dust rag, and the secretary brought a legal pad. They surrounded the chief in the pastor's small study. They watched the video. The chief shook his head and said he was sorry. There wasn't a lot he could do. He said he couldn't assign a detective to a misdemeanor property crime. They were down a dozen officers, and, frankly, they had bigger fish to fry.

Pastor Cline was indignant. "There are no bigger fish," Rev. Cline said, "when it comes to stealing the Son of God."

The Chief, who had grown up Catholic and now sang in the choir at the Methodist church across the street, tried to calm down the pastor. "The Son of God has not gone missing," the chief said. "Right? I mean, it's a cheap, plastic Jesus that sits on top of a bare light bulb. The real Jesus is alive and well. Am I right, pastor?"

Of course, he was right, but the pastor wasn't going to admit it.

"Look at it this way," the chief finally said. "The empty spot where the manger is supposed to sit forces everyone to fill in the blank. They have to imagine what the missing manger looks like. They have to wonder, Is baby Jesus sleeping, or looking up at stars, or what? They might ask, 'I wonder where Jesus is at?' That's not a bad thing for people to ponder, is it?" the chief asked. "I mean, it could be having a nativity without a plastic Jesus actually makes people think *more* about the real Jesus."

This made sense to the church secretary, choir director, and custodian, and they all started bobbing their heads. But Pastor Cline would not be convinced, and the others resumed their somber looks as the chief politely took his leave.

It was a harmless enough crime. But it was a matter of principle. Who does this? And Pastor Cline, for one, was tired of it. Getting to the bottom of this had consumed him.

It had been a hard year, and messing around with Jesus was the last straw.

The church was coming out of the pandemic; numbers were down. Old programs were slow coming back, and some seemed like too much trouble, so they disappeared. People met on Zoom. They had become more efficient but, the pastor feared, less communal. Rev. Cline could no longer comment about the world in his sermons because he no longer understood the world.

And, naturally, he blamed himself, even though in his head he knew it couldn't possibly be his fault. But still, if he were a better preacher, a better pastor, a better human-being the church wouldn't be in this boat. Maybe he should polish his teeth and smile more.

Or, maybe, at least, he could put an end to these robberies. He didn't know when he had become Jesus' personal body guard, but he did know this: At least one small thing would go right this Christmas—come hell or high water. At least one small thing.

So, three afternoons before Christmas Eve, Rev. Cline stashed a sleeping bag under the butterfly bushes in the church flowerbed and conspired to conduct his own stakeout when it got dark. He would catch that robber in the act and make a citizen's arrest. Finally, the holy family could spend a whole night together uninterrupted in that store-bought, plastic stable, and Jesus could sleep in heavenly peace

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Pastor Cline pulled off his plan with only one, small hitch. Just after 10 o'clock, after the buses stopped running, a couple walked into the stable to get a closer look. The pastor jumped out of the bushes and shouted, "Don't you dare touch Jesus!"

The couple leaned away from the plastic manger.

The pastor immediately understood his mistake. These were college kids out for a late walk. They wore no masks, no dark clothes, no toboggan hats. She had a small purse on a strap, but no toolbox. They weren't the robbers.

"Carry on," he said awkwardly. "And Merry Christmas."

They backed away, then quickly disappeared down the sidewalk. So much for welcoming young adults into the church.

An hour later, though, a more alert pastor saw the real culprit step into the bright circle of light, kneel at the manger, then pull out a cordless drill. After four short blasts backing out screws, the manger was free, and the robber stood up to leave with Jesus under his arm.

"Ah ha!" the pastor said as he staggered from the bushes with his sleeping bag wrapped around his ankles. "I've caught you."

"Caught me?" the masked person asked. "Mister, are you okay? The winter shelter is down on Washington Street. I can walk with you, if you want. It's warmer there. It's too cold to sleep under the bushes."

Pastor Cline was taken aback by this unexpected kindness. He wasn't expecting gunfire, exactly, but he also wasn't expecting friendliness.

"I'm not homeless," the pastor said, "I'm the pastor here, and you're under arrest for stealing Jesus."

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In his office overlooking the front lawn—otherwise known as the scene of the crime—Pastor Cline put on a pot of tea. The boy—a junior from the high school—sat in a chair and showed no signs of running. The pastor fumbled to conceal his trembling hands. He had planned to catch the culprit, yes, but he hadn't rehearsed what he would say to the robber once he had nabbed him. He felt uncharacteristically befuddled.

The boy broke the ice.

"You read all these books?" he asked, pointing to the pastor's floor-to-ceiling shelves.

They chatted some. The boy—his name was Michael—liked books, he said. He played on the chess team and was pretty good. Was on the debate team, which he liked more and was better at. His mom worked nights at the hospital, which is why he often stayed out too late. He had good grades and had never traveled outside of Illinois, not even to Indiana.

"Who'd want to go to Indiana?" the pastor asked.

Pastor Cline told Michael a little about himself, about how he came from Nebraska and had been a pastor his whole adult life. When he was a kid, he wanted to drive a garbage truck. Sometimes, even now, he still does. Conversation calmed him down a little, and he poured the tea. He couldn't believe he was chitchatting with the one who had captured his imagination every Christmas for the last three and had caused such wild frustration.

"Look," Pastor Cline said finally, sitting on the corner of his desk. "You could go to juvy for this."

"You going to call the cops?" Michael asked.

"They've got bigger fish to fry," Pastor Cline said. "Or so I'm told."

He still couldn't believe he was having a practical tea party with the crook who had driven him insane over these years. "You've stolen twenty-two Jesuses this year alone," Pastor Cline said. "I presume you've been at this a long time?"

Michael nodded.

"Why are you doing this? Who's your fence?"

"Fence?" Michael asked.

"Who are you selling Jesus to?" The pastor corrected his grammar. "To whom are you selling Jesus? Are you buying drugs with the money?"

"Drugs?" the boy asked. "No. No, sir. I'm not selling Jesus to anybody. I can't think of anybody who'd want to buy a used plastic Jesus in the manger—except maybe a church at Christmas." Michael took a thoughtful breath. "At first," he said, "it was a gag. A rush. Something to do. Then it became a mission."

"Stealing Jesus became a mission?"

"I kept them hidden in my basement for a while. My Momma never goes down there anymore since we moved the washing machine upstairs. One day I looked around and saw all those Jesuses in our basement and thought that was just wrong. What kind of nut-job keeps a bunch of plastic Jesuses in the basement? It suddenly felt really weird, you know what I mean?"

Pastor Cline felt his face grow warm.

"Anyway," the boy continued, "Jesus wasn't meant for the basement, I thought. So, I started putting him on the porches of my neighborhood. My neighborhood, by the way, is right around this church and along the railroad tracks to the north. Surely, you've noticed all the Jesuses on front porches."

The pastor felt his face grow warmer. "I don't spend a lot of time in this neighborhood, to be honest."

"A lot grandmothers live in these houses," Michael continued. "They take care of their grandkids. And you mentioned drugs. Some of these places sell drugs, I'm not gonna lie. I thought these people—our neighbors—could use a little surprise. Not a drive-by, or a visit from a cop, or a bill collector, but a good surprise, for a change."

Pastor Cline got up off the corner of his desk, sat heavily in his swivel chair, and leaned back. He had imagined this moment unfolding differently. He had imagined delivering an impassioned, finger-wagging screed about honesty, a thou-shalt-not steal from your neighbors lecture. Cline loved these neighbors only theoretically, it seemed, but this teenaged Robin Hood sitting in his office loved in a tangible way. This brave kid was trying to give them a little of God's grace. Isn't this exactly what the weary world has always been pining for?

"I don't know," Pastor Cline heard himself say out loud. "I just don't know."

"You sure you aren't going to call the cops on me?"

"I'm positive," the pastor said. "But you know stealing is wrong, right?"

Michael nodded.

"And you know these Jesuses belong to me, not to you?"

Michael nodded again.

"I've got something I want to show you," the pastor said. "Follow me."

He led Michael down the hall, clicking on lights as they walked, through the office, to the steel door to the basement. "You ready for this?"

Michael's eyes grew wide, and he reluctantly nodded.

"I guess?"

Pastor Cline opened the basement door and hit the light switch. Michael leaned into the doorway and his eyes grew wider as he looked at the neat rows of plastic Jesuses.

"How many you got down here?" Michael asked.

"Forty-eight minus the twenty-two you stole, and maybe a few left over from last year. You do the math." Pastor Cline shook his head.

“Can I ask why?” Michael asked.

The pastor began slowly. “I wanted our nativity scene to be complete. I couldn’t stand the idea that Jesus kept going missing. We wanted to keep Jesus here, and you wanted to give Jesus away. That’s pretty cool, I guess. And you’re right: There are a lot of hurting people out in the world who could use a *good* surprise, for a change. I guess I am one of those people.”

He turned off the light and closed the door. Michael followed him back to his office.

“It’s late, and I’ll drive you home. But I’m not letting you off the hook. Do you think we could deliver all of those Jesuses to our neighbors before Christmas—if we started tomorrow night? I can borrow my choir director’s pick up.”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “Is this my punishment? Is this how you want me to pay you back?”

“No,” Pastor Cline said. “I’m going to pay *you*. You are my new Director of Neighborhood Relations. We might need to work on that title. But I want you to introduce me to every single one of our neighbors. I’ll pay you minimum wage, to start with. We’ll have to get your mom on board. We’ve got to work out details. There’s paper work, forms, you know, details.”

“But I don’t know all our neighbors,” Michael said.

“We will,” the pastor said. “We’ll meet everybody, one-by-one. But first, we’ve got to secretly hand out all those Jesuses. We can start tomorrow night, after it gets good and dark.”

The pastor stuffed some papers on his desk into his backpack and grabbed his coat.

Michael put on his hat and zipped up his thick sweatshirt. He picked up his tool box and the Jesus he had stolen that night.

“Where are you taking that?” Pastor Cline asked, pointing to the plastic Jesus.

“We can hit one house on my way home,” Michael said. “People could use a little good news sooner than later, don’t you think?”

“I think,” the pastor said, “that I set out to capture a thief tonight, but I got a theologian, instead.”

They clicked off the lights as they made their way to the church doors. Pastor Cline set the alarm. They stepped into the parking lot, into the bitter cold night.

Pastor Bryan Cline from Sandhill Crane country on the Platte River in Nebraska looked into the clear Illinois sky and watched his breath rise to the stars. There were moments in his life where he could barely take it all in—this vast cosmos, a billion unnoticed human kindnesses in a world known for indifference, a few really amazing surprises slipping between all the bad headlines. The idea of God’s love eluded him, enthralled him. Gift. Mystery.

He didn’t know. He just didn’t know. But he felt glad, deeply so, and he hadn’t felt really glad for a long time. It had been a long haul, a tough few years. Pandemic. Quarantine. Paradigms shifting. Fractious politics. Changes he still didn’t have a feel for. Changes *in himself* he still couldn’t fathom.

But now he felt glad, and he couldn’t explain it. He couldn’t take it in.

The older he got, the more often these moments came.

Like this moment. Like now.

And who was this skinny, articulate kid he was driving home? He never would have imagined Michael’s story colliding with his like it did tonight. Was it grace or just dumb luck? *He didn’t know. He just didn’t know.* He wondered how his unlikely association with his new Director of Neighborhood Relations might grow. He didn’t know that, either.

He wondered if the church would ever again have a Jesus in its life-sized nativity. Maybe the police chief was right. People might think of the real Jesus more if the plastic Jesus were gone.

Michael broke the silence.

“Some people don’t even like Christmas,” Michael said. “Do you like Christmas?”

“Tonight,” the pastor said, “I like Christmas more than I ever have.”

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