

As we are all aware of these days, there's a lot of division and fear in our world. We can be quite divided over everything from politics, to thoughts on Covid and how to handle it, to the squabbles in families that take place. Inevitably division is often good; I root for the Vikings while others (we'll call them misguided) root for the Packers; I have political beliefs that are very different from a good friend of mine; and I'm an introvert while others are more extraverted. Differences are a good thing, but sometimes they can tear us apart as people. And on top of this, sometimes when we compare ourselves to others, thinking they are better than us or there is something wrong with us, we can feel isolated.

Cookie Curci, a freelance writer, tells a story of how her grandfather felt this way once upon a time. But that all changed on Christmas Eve, 1941.

Her grandfather was known to her as Papa Vincenzo, the patriarch of a family of Italian immigrants. That year, in a story that was well known in her family, he had a brand new RCA Victor Radio. It was his habit each night, after one of Mama Saveria's robust Italian meals, to position himself by his beloved radio and tune in the nightly antics of radio characters "Fibber McGee and Moly," "Amos 'n Andy," "Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy," and "The Lone Ranger." He loved his radio shows.

There were no complexities to Papa Vincenzo's lifestyle; his needs were easily satisfied by a good meal, a warm home, and a loving family. He lived his life by the simple and old fashioned creed: "Pray for the things you want; work for the things you need."

If Papa had one luxury, it was the acquisition of a household radio. The radio had become a vital component of his daily life. It restored his energy and brought back his sense of humor after a long workday in the fruit orchards of the Santa Clara Valley. With the impending arrival of World War II, the economy had begun to tighten, but Cookie's budget-wise Grandpa had managed to scrimp and save enough money from his meager earnings as a tree pruner to purchase the new radio. Although Papa had known poverty in the Old Country, he felt he'd never been poor, only broke. Being poor, Papa believed, was a state of mind; being broke was only a temporary situation.

Papa loved his new radio, but Grandma preferred listening to her old Victrola or pattering around her wood stove to sitting by the radio - until the day she heard her first episode of "One Man's Family" on NBC radio. From that moment on, she was an ardent fan of the new media.

In time, her grandma came to believe the radio had been sent to them as a blessing. It helped both her and Papa Vincenzo to learn better English, and it boosted their social life as well. The radio gave them a common topic to discuss with their neighbors, who also listened nightly to the same radio programs.

On warm summer nights, Papa's neighborhood cronies, Mr. Goldstein, Mr. Miller, and Mr. Rosenberg, sat with Papa on his front stoop, discussing their favorite radio programs. There were times when Mr. Goldstein explained the meaning of a certain

Yiddish word Papa had heard on the “Molly Goldberg Show.” Other times, Papa translated a Puccini opera for Mr. Goldstein. Some nights, the old friends had a good laugh at the expense of the contestants on “Major Bowes’ Original Amateur Hour.” The radio helped to bond these old friends, who came from vastly different backgrounds, in a way few things could.

The men had left their Old Country to escape tyranny and oppression, and as young immigrants they had settled into the neighborhood together. Although they came from varied parts of the world and followed different religious beliefs, the old friends shared a love for their new country and family traditions.

And so their friendship grew - until that fateful December day in 1941, when Papa’s radio brought him the terrible news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. He would hear President Roosevelt declare war with Japan and the Axis powers, Germany and Italy. It was a declaration of war that changed Papa’s life.

The knock on Papa’s door came early that December morning in 1941. It brought with it a special-delivery letter from the government of the United States declaring that her grandfather had to surrender all radios on his premises - effective immediately.

He had no political ties to his former country. he had worked and lived in America for more than 30 years and raised his children and grandchildren as honest, hardworking American citizens. But the fact remained that he was a native of Italy, a country now ruled by the fascist tyrant Benito Mussolini, who chose to side with the Axis powers against the United States.

As Papa read the dispatch, tears of indignation rolled down his face. Losing his radio would be sad enough, but Papa was more concerned that he might lost the company and respect of his friends in the community, which he had earned for more than 30 years.

More than anything else, Papa prided himself on his honest and high moral character. He was a man of his word. Now he feared that a war thousands of miles away had cast a shadow of aspersions over him. It appeared Papa’s fears were well-founded; some his employers, leery of Italian aliens, started canceling their job offers.

Papa worried that his longtime friendship with the Goldsteins, the Rosenbergs, and the millers was also in jeopardy. Would they also view him differently now?

Could they somehow believe he shared the same political views and beliefs as the terrible tyrant Mussolini?

That Christmas Eve, in 1941, Papa and Grandma sat quietly in their favorite chairs, warming themselves by the fire. Papa couldn’t help but miss the raucous sounds of his radio, and the daily banger with his friends and neighbors, which he feared he had now lost.

A knock on the door brought Papa quickly to his feet.

He approached his front door with trepidation.

Opening the door, Papa was relieved and surprised to find the warm familiar faces of his old pals standing on his front stoop.

Mr. Goldstein was the first to speak up. "Vincenzo my friend, the United States government says that you can no longer own a radio. Is this correct?"

Wearing a quizzical expression on his face, Papa answered "Yes-yes this is so."

"But the government did not forbid you should listen to the radio, correct" inquired Mr. Rosenberg.

"Correct," Papa repeated.

Papa's neighbors handed him a sheet of paper, on which was written a handwritten time schedule listing all of his favorite radio programs. Each program and time corresponded with a neighbor's address. His old pals had gotten together and worked out a radio listening schedule for Papa and Grandma that included every show from "The Goldbergs" to "Little Orphan Annie."

"Read it, my friend," encouraged Mr. Rosenberg. "It's all there. On Monday, you and the missus will listen to Fibber McGee and Molly" at the Miller's home; on Tuesday, 'The Goldbergs' and 'Major Bowes Show' at my house; on Wednesday, 'Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy' at the Smiths' house, and so on, until all of your favorite programs are accounted for. You and the missus won't miss one of your favorite shows if we can help it, Vincenzo."

Papa's eyes filled with tears, but this time they were tears of joy and gratitude. Papa invited his dear friends into his house to celebrate the occasion. While Papa poured a glass of his homemade red wine for each of his friends, and grandma passed around her freshly baked biscotti.

Before going to bed that night, Papa and Grandma said a silent prayer of thanks. Papa had lost his valuable radio on that somber day in 1941, but what he'd found in friendship on that very special Christmas Eve was truly priceless.

Each year as we gather for Christmas, we are quite familiar with the story: Jesus born in a manger on a cold winter's night; the shepherds hearing the message from the angels; and the words from Isaiah that the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. And while there is familiarity, I think today these words are more important than ever, because each of us needs to remember that this light comes to us, and is a joy and hope that we can spread too.

For starters, like Cookie's grandfather Papa Vincenzo, sometimes we too can be afraid. In his case he was fearful of losing his friends, even though he faced an unjust situation. But before he even said a word, his friends came to him. Such is the nature of God for us. Born in the night, His light darkness that can creep into our lives. We all have so much on our plate; the sins we struggle with; our anxieties and fears. No matter where we are at in life, we can come to our God with anything, so know that the God we worship is not just the historical infant we look back to each year, but the God who is alive and journeys with us step by step. Open up your heart and let Him in by talking to Him. Heed the words of the angel: "Do not be afraid." If you've been away from Mass for a while know you are always welcome here. The paradox is in order for us to love, we make ourselves vulnerable. In the midst of all our problems, troubles and worries, we might wonder if God will remember His love for us. Sometimes we reject that love and spiritual darkness takes place in our souls. But as sin separates us from God and one another, God chooses to do something about it - not just once upon a time, but here and now. We look to God who is Emmanuel, or with us, and when we open up ourselves we can be transformed. This night reminds us that our newborn king brings his light into our lives.

Lastly, let us never forget the greatest gift we give others is the gift of ourselves. Each of us has the power to do so much to bring God's light into the world; to spread the good news. For Papa Vincenzo, his neighbors, all of different cultures, did that for him through the simple gesture of opening their homes to him. Over the course of our lives, sometimes it's so easy to become selfish, or mean or cruel. A nasty comment here or there online, some little gossip there, a look here or there and something we shouldn't look at, skipping mass just this once - little things add up. Think of World War II and the discrimination so many people faced around the world, including here in America where the Japanese were interred and so many looked the other way. But how about if we use the Christmas event to truly be a spark plug to the world. To seize the moment to show kindness, mercy and compassion. You add up the little things like Papa Vincenzo's friends did for him, and what an incredible difference we can make for our families and the world. We can make the choice: to stand up for others who are ridiculed; to speak the truth of our faith even if unpopular; to refrain from tearing others down; to give the gift of our time to people especially under our own roof. We can all make the choice to live lives that radiate the love of God, one simple action at a time.

In writing about his autistic son, writer Michael Gingerish tells of how as soon as Halloween is over each year, his son Matthew would wait for the lights. At the time of his writing, he'd been doing it for more than a dozen years. As the days grow shorter and the nights grow longer, as the temperatures drop and the leaves fall, he waits for the lights. He knows that they will come.

The neighbors across the street always would put up a beautiful and brilliant light display for the holidays and his son loved to wait for them to be turned on, which usually happened right after Thanksgiving. But Matthew would begin his vigil a month before their arrival. And then, each day between Thanksgiving and until the lights are turned off after the new year, he waits, excitedly from mid-afternoon on. each day he'll stand by

the front windows or walk back and forth between the windows and the front door, in energetic and coiled anticipation, laser-focused, undeterred, intent on the moment of their nightly illumination.

And when each evening's moment comes, he notes you don't have to be right with him when that moment occurs. You know it no matter where you are in the house. The effervescent squealing. The rhythmic clapping. The dancing around the house, the steps staccato, loud, repeated. It's pure joy. Pure delight on his face. And it happens every single night.

He waits for the lights. During the darkest days of the year. He stands and he waits. Transfixed by those lights brightening the dim, winter sky.

Michael notes for all his son's limitations, in the world's view - his severe mental disabilities, his autism, his two year old mind in a 23 year old body, his inability to speak - his son Matthew knows something very profound, that light will shine in the darkness, that no matter how dark, how long the wait, eventually and without fail, those lights will shine again. No matter how many seasons of the year without them, there will come a season when those lights will shine again. They always do.

He closes by saying life brings its own seasons of darkness. Desperate, at times. Lonely. Painful. Full of fear. But despite those seasons, a new season can come and the light can be seen again. Whatever darkness he finds within him and around him, he looks to his son and remembers that a light can pierce that darkness and begin to bring beauty and joy again.

We see that in our loved ones too, but in an even more perfect way in our Lord and Redeemer whose birth we celebrate. Let His love and light pierce the darkness in your life. See the good and light in your soul and know you are loved. See the good in the world and increase it. The seasons of darkness will always come, but the light of God's love will always shine - so let that light into your souls and be transformed by it make the choice to bring it to the world, one action of love and mercy at a time, never forgetting how precious you are to God, and what a difference you can make in giving people the greatest gift there is: love. Peace be with you, and Merry Christmas.