

## Christmas Day 2022

### I.

This week, I received a wonderful set of pictures from my colleague, Keith Denman, who was in seminary with me in Montreal. He is Rector of a parish in Newfoundland, and the photos recorded part of a service in his church that celebrates this holy season of the year. Keith was always the guy who thought beyond the lines. He put theological cartoons on the chapel bulletin board, and dared to question silly rules, so this idea of his should not have been a surprise to me.

If Newfoundland, Canada is new to you, there are a couple of facts we should know to appreciate the symbolism of what happened in that service. First, the climate there is very dark and cold, and the people are very friendly. Often, there are stories of folks coming home from errands and finding a couple of neighbors or friends warming themselves in the kitchen and waiting for you to offer them a cup of tea.

People don't lock their doors. When on 9/11, world-wide passenger planes were rerouted to avoid New York, the people near the Gander, Newfoundland airport took the travelers in and provided food, house and home to strangers for an extended period.

So, I was not surprised to see this new Christmas tradition of theirs. In the Sanctuary, there is a tall, decorated Christmas tree with colored lights all plugged in. But the Rector has carefully unscrewed every bulb on the string. The tree is enjoyable, but entirely dark. One by one, oldest to youngest, each person is invited to come up, choose a color and screw the bulb on until it's lit. The symbolism is not lost on anyone. It takes the whole parish assembled to provide God's light to the world in that dark place, and it is beautiful!

### II.

Another chilly and dark place well south of the Newfies, the folks of New Hampshire and Vermont Public Radio used to get a weekly treat from a masterful storyteller, Willem Lange. His Christmas story, which we heard years ago, has now been published in an illustrated book, and you can look it up on the Internet. The inspiration for the title comes from this hymn, Praise, my Soul, the King of Heaven; and the second verse goes like this;

Praise Him for His grace and favor  
To our fathers in distress;  
Praise Him, still the same forever,  
Slow to chide and swift to bless.  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Glorious in His faithfulness.

As Willem tells it, on a small hill farm in Vermont, the wife of the farmer gave birth to twins, a girl and a boy, and she named them after the hymn, Grace was the girl and Favor was her brother twin. There they grew up. Grace Johnson got married and she and her husband built a house nearby and had a daughter of their own. When WWII began, Favor Johnson was declared too old for the infantry, but the Army drafted him anyway and made him a cook. Favor had never cooked before but he took to it and even made special dinners for the officers' mess. After discharge, he returned to the farm, alone except for his dog Hercules because his mother and father and Grace had died by then, Grace's husband had left and their daughter had moved away.

Favor kept a few milk cows and some chickens and a hog, and watched the price of land and taxes rise, while his own income shrank. The realtors kept urging him to sell his farm and he finally had to give in. It went to a wealthy Boston doctor and his wife, who built a big house facing the mountains and came up on weekends, planning to live there after retirement.

Dr. Jennings was anxious to be good neighbors with Favor Johnson and sometimes dropped by to

say hello and often left little gifts which Favor never wanted and never used. But one night after milking, Hercules did not come home and Favor went looking for him because he heard shots from rabbit hunters in the woods, and it had snowed hard during the day. Pacing under the trees, he finally heard a low whine and he found Hercules all shot up and unmoving. Favor picked up his dog and slogged through the snow, finally coming up on the fence line to hear the doctor's big luxury car crunching up the hill. Wrapping Hercules in a blanket and taking him to Favor's house instead of trying to find a Vet, Dr. Jennings agreed that it was better to let the poor dog die in his own home, he urged his wife to go to his house for the first aid kit. The doc finished the job, and Favor put Hercules back in his dog cot by the stove. Favor went back to his own bed, the doctor went home, and in the morning, Hercules was wagging his tail, albeit weakly. Doc came by, checked him out and declared Hercules out of the woods. "Happy Christmas" he said and handed Favor a store-bought fruit cake. By himself again, Favor took a taste and declared it awful. "I can do better than that!" he said. So, he got to work and gifted the Jennings a cake of his own creation. The next year, he made a few more for friends. Covered in aluminum foil, a soup can for a couple or someone living alone, a vegetable can for a family of four, and a tomato can for families of five or more. were piled up as gifts. On the night before Christmas, he delivered them at their kitchen doors, sometimes stopping in for conversation. Before long, he was delivering his fruit cakes to every household in the entire village. The children thought he was Santa Claus in disguise, and when they questioned their folks, the answer was, "That's just his way of helping."

I love this story. Look it up under Favor Johnson: a Christmas Story to hear it told by Willem Lange himself or get your hands on the book. But what does it mean?

A lonely man, left by family, made by circumstances to sell off the best of his land, whose only daily conversation was with his dog, has a conversion experience by a neighbor's kindness and skill. And as he turned around to look at love, his reaction was to give the gift back, and keep giving, until he had a whole village of neighbors with their love and respect. That's how God works with Gifts. The Gift of Jesus Christ, giving something of your own, making a decision and sticking with it for your own benefit and a widening circle of good consequence beyond explaining.

III.

Gift, Giving, Forgiving. From what we find out daily in the media, it seems that it does not pay to broadcast good news, so many never find out that the act of Forgiving is really Christmas Gift-giving. Pure Grace and Favor in action. You decide. You decide to forgive, you decide to willingly and freely to give a gift to somebody, who may never know you did it. But the gift comes back to you as Timothy Keller says in his essay in the December 4th Sunday New York Times, this is not about forgetting or forgetting that justice must somehow be met. If there is evil at work, it must be acknowledged, or you will just be excusing the evil and trying to make yourself look good. That doesn't work.

We have been given a gift free with no strings...no preconditions, no tit for tat. This is not transactional. This is not Let's Make a Deal. We cannot receive God's benefit unless we are real and understand that such a Gift is too big and too hard to do unless God's Grace helps us make it happen. We have the ultimate model of how this works in the Nearness of Jesus Christ's example. Maybe the personal pledge of forgiveness to somebody or some institution is the only way to change the future. Maybe it is all of us, individually, making this personal, private decision, to Favor someone, to expect God's Grace to help, to screw on that colored Christmas bulb of our souls and light up our village, our world. So, let us on this Christmas Day resolve to give a gift of forgiveness, and receive redemption, and accept its Joy.

Amen? Amen.

the Rev. Dr. Aloha Smith+