

SOMEONE PONDERES, SOMEONE PRAYS
TITUS 2: 11-14

Christmas Eve, 2008
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

The Christmas Eve snow blew heavily into the windshield of the sport utility vehicle as the Barnes family left the Target store at 44th and Pulaski. "It's been a tough month," Jake thought. "Too much snow, too much cold weather (even Tom Skilling can't get all his statistics correct about how this year compares to previous ones) and --worst of all--too much grief in our family."

The kids were restless in the back seat. "We're going to be late for church, Daddy!" croaked Maddie. "I want to be there in time to get a seat up front!" "You must not be a Methodist, Maddie. You always want to sit near the front of the church and you like to sing loudly. Perhaps you're adopted."

"That's what we keep telling her," piped up her older brother, A.J. "She's so different from the rest of the family. Don't you think?" "She is not!" their mother, Beth, shot back. "Maddie is just her own person. And she is most definitely not adopted. Look at those Barnes' ears. She is definitely your Dad's child."

As they drove north on Pulask, Jake looked in the rear view mirror at Wendy, the middle child, the precocious but quiet daughter who never seemed certain of her place in the family hierarchy. "What do you like best about Christmas Eve, Wendy?"

"The carols, the candles and, most of all, the quietness of the church. I notice that people don't come in the way they do every Sunday morning --talking and gossiping and not preparing for worship."

"Yep, that's my girl," thought Jake. "She is probably the most spiritual person in the family."

Just at that moment Jake noticed a man standing on the east side of Pulaski. He had his thumb out. "How long has it been since I saw a hitch hiker? And on Christmas Eve!" The man was tall, dressed in a shearling coat and western boots. He huddled against the driving snow under a cowboy hat. Jake slowed the Expedition. "What are you doing?" asked Beth. "I'm going to pick that man up." "What? You don't know anything about him. He could be a mass murderer for all you know. Besides, we have the whole family in the car and we're on our way to Christmas Eve services at University Church."

"Well, it's Christmas Eve, and I think we should do something for someone else on this night of all nights. And do you think an old man could overpower those three monsters in the back seat? Hey, A.J., Wendy, Maddie. You all climb into the third seat so we can give this poor guy a ride."

Shaking the snow off his hat, and stomping his boots on the running board of the SUV, the man climbed into the back seat with aplomb. "Hey, thanks, fella. I really appreciate this. It's been a

long day and I have a long way to go tonight. Thanks for stopping to pick me up. I thought I was going to have to walk all the way to Hyde Park.”

“Where are you going in Hyde Park?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I’m looking for a church, a place where I can worship God on Christmas Eve. I love all the candles and carols, but I love Holy Communion on Christmas Eve. I am a man of many words. I love to talk, I love to read, but the holy mystery of Communion, taking the bread and wine --that’s so real for me. It’s beyond words. Beyond feelings.

“Oh, by the way, my name is Willis Gibson. I’m originally from Luther, Oklahoma. Used to work in the oil fields down there. Lately I’ve been working construction on I-88 up here in this damn snow and ice and cold. Oh, forgive me, kids. I’m sure you never heard a cuss word until just now. And on Christmas Eve to boot.”

Jake looked at Willis Gibson’s profile in the rear view mirror. “Why don’t you have a car, Mr. Gibson? Why are you hitch hiking?”

“Call me Willis. Mr. Gibson was my Dad. Oh, I have a car. A new Ford Explorer, not as big as this ol’ Expedition. But the courts won’t let me drive it. Too many arrests for drunk driving. I won’t be able to drive it for another sixty days. I have messed up my life, Mister --what did you say your name is?-- I have been to more AA meetings than church services, and I go dry and sober for months at a time, then fall off the wagon. Did that again two months ago. So now I’m hitch hiking to find a Church on Christmas Eve. And, as Martin Luther said many, many years ago, trying to find a gracious God.”

Maddie almost shouted from the third seat: “Oh, Mr. Gibson, you can go to church with us. We’re on our way to University Church. We go there every Sunday, and sometimes on Wednesday nights. My Dad and Mom are big shots in University Church. I love the Sunday School for kids, we had a great Halloween party, and my brother and sister love the Sunday morning social hour and we...”

“That’s enough, Maddie,” said Beth. “But, yes, Mr. Gibson, why don’t you come to the Christmas Eve service with us? I am Beth Barnes. My husband is Jake. Our three children there behind you are A.J., Wendy and Maddie.”

“Well, thank you, Ms. Barnes. I would love to. But I won’t sit with you all. I’m not appropriately dressed, and to tell you the truth I haven’t had a shower for a couple of days. It’s been a rough season. But then most Christmases are hard for me. I haven’t seen my kids in three years. My ex-wife has remarried.”

After a long silence, Willis spoke again. “You see, Christmas for me is not just about candles and carols and Holy Communion. It’s about sin and forgiveness. Do you know the Danish poet and philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard? I had this crazy preacher years ago back in Oklahoma who used to quote Kierkegaard every Sunday. I remember a Christmas Eve sermon in which that preacher talked about Kierkegaard. He said that Jesus came not as a divine-human idea but as the One

who elicits faith and becomes the unique agent of God's redemption. Tell you the truth, I didn't know what he meant at the time. I am still struggling with the idea --no, the reality of-- redemption. But one thing I do know: nobody needs forgiveness, needs God's grace as dearly as Willis Gibson."

Wendy began to hum "Silent Night, Holy Night" as they turned on to 57th Street. Then, she tapped Willis Gibson on the shoulder. "Can you forgive someone who is dead, Mr. Gibson?" Willis turned around in the middle seat and faced her. "Well, yes, Wendy, I s'pose you can. Why do you ask?" Wendy leaned forward, close enough to smell Gibson's breath. "I'm having a hard time right now." She began to weep silently. Willis took a soiled handkerchief from his jeans' pocket and handed it to her. Wendy ignored it. "My best friend, Amy, killed herself last week. Went into her parents' garage and turned on the car and breathed in all the carbon monoxide. She died peacefully, I suppose, but she has left us, all her friends, with anger and regret. I don't know how I will get through the candles and carols tonight."

Willis put his hand on Wendy's shoulder. "You go to Sunday School, don't you?" She nodded. "And church?" She nodded. "How many sermons do you think you must have heard in your sixteen years? Hundreds? Do you remember any of them?" "Parts of some of them," Wendy replied.

"O.K. After the Christmas Eve service tonight I want you to go home and turn in your Bible to the seventh chapter of Luke's Gospel. You remember how you had to learn the books of the Bible when you were in the third grade? Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and so on. Read that story about the woman who comes into Simon the Pharisee's house when Jesus is having supper with the big shots of the village.

"She would not have been invited to the supper, first of all, because she was a woman. Even more important, she was a sinner. If nothing else could have held her back from bustin' into that hifalutin' house, it would have been the contempt of the Pharisees, their accusations, their holy indignation.

"But you know --don't you? --what happened. The woman comes into the house bent over with shame and guilt, bearing the weight of the multitude of her sins, the judgment of all the good people.

"Jesus discovered what the world was hiding --the love in her. And when nobody else would help her, His love came to her aid. And he made the love in her powerful enough to cover the multitude of her sins. The love, sweet Wendy, was already there.

"Remember what Jesus said to all those self-righteous, good, judgmental people at that supper: her many sins are forgiven, because she loved much.

"I don't know why your friend Amy took her own life. Nobody does. Every suicide leaves us with unanswerable questions. But, I assure you, Wendy, that she is forgiven. Because she loved so much, God forgives her. And I hope you can. That's what Christmas is ultimately, always

about: forgiveness.”

Silence pervaded the automobile. They turned north on to University Avenue. The Christmas lights in Hyde Park seemed to glisten through the tears of everybody in the car.

Jake found a parking place on the street directly across from University Church. Willis opened the rear door of the SUV, then helped the three Barnes kids out on the sidewalk. As they started across the street toward the church, Wendy took his hand. She reached up and gave him a kiss on his weathered cheek.

As they approached the front door of University Church, Willis moved Wendy’s hand away from his. He shook hands with Jake, then Beth, then Maddie, and finally A.J. and Wendy. “Thank you all for the ride tonight. I hope your Christmas is filled with peace and forgiveness and new life. And, Wendy, I hope you can find some comfort because of our conversation.

“God bless you all. You are a wonderful family. Please pray for my family --wherever they are tonight. You all go on into the church. I will wait outside for a few minutes. Blessed Christmas.”

Throughout the service, Wendy and A.J. and Maddie kept looking back from the third row of the church to try to spot their new friend and mentor. A.J. watched everyone who came forward to receive the Sacrament at the climax of the worship service. Willis Gibson did not appear.

After the service when they made their way back to the car, Wendy turned to her Dad and asked, “What do you think Mr. Gibson meant about forgiveness, Dad? About Amy’s death?”

Jake stopped on the west side of University Avenue, held Wendy in his arms and spoke softly into her hair, “I think the truth of forgiveness, Wendy, must be made true by each individual, and each individual can do that only by taking to heart the image of that woman in Luke’s story and only by loving much.’ When you love much, much is forgiven youBand you love much because much has been forgiven you.”

As their car rounded the corner at 57th Street, A.J. thought he saw a man in a cowboy hat, faded jeans and cowboy boots standing in the shadows of University Church.