

The Midnight Visitor

By Ted LaFemina

The crash of the empty plastic water pitcher on the hospital room floor was surprisingly loud in the previously quiet stillness of night. As the pitcher was completing its roll under the bed, the weak voice of a recently dozing child exclaimed: "You're not nurse Lilly!"

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"No. Not really. I haven't been sleeping too well lately," said the small boy as he glanced up at the clock. "It's midnight. They don't allow visitors at midnight on the children's ward unless ... " he paused as a look of sadness swept over his face, "are you here to see someone?"

"Oh please don't look so sad," I replied. "I just came here to drop off a few things, I wasn't sent here to see anyone." Although even as the words left my lips, I began to sense that this may not be so true. I turned and looked more carefully at the small boy lying in that sterile hospital bed. Then at the tubes running up from under his bed covers to an array of blinking machines. With soft clicks and whirs, the machines measured out a variety of medicines in an endless series of drops. As I looked back down into his face, I could not help but notice his eyes. This small child had the eyes of someone who looked to have lived through many cycles of determined hope and crushing fear.

It would make the day of most boys, his age, to be given a new toy, or maybe a new bicycle. I could tell, though, that simple trinkets would no longer bring this little fellow such joy. Once you've come to understand how precious and fleeting life can be, your desire to spend it on such things has a way of deserting you.

As he gazed at me, he had a look of both uncertainty, as he wondered what I was doing in his room, and of resignation, because he knew that in his weakened state, it didn't matter –his fate was in God's hands anyway, as it always has been.

That look told me that my plans for the evening were in need of a change.

I thought for a moment, and then decided to share a story with this brave young boy that I hadn't shared in a very long time.

"I'm sorry that I've startled you," I said. "I had an unexpected visitor once and I wasn't quite sure what to make of him. For a moment, I thought he might try to take my life. Would you like to hear about it?"

The boy didn't say anything at first but then replied. "A story sounds nice. Nurse Lilly wants me to sleep, but this medicine makes it hard," he paused, and then added: "I don't want to keep you from your work, though. My dad has to stay at his job until he finishes and I wouldn't want to keep you away

from your family. Are you sure you have time?”

“Do I have time?” I thought to myself and chuckled, as I pulled an orange plastic chair up next to his bed. “Oh, I can spare a few minutes for a special person like you.

“Many years ago,” I began, as I tried, but failed, to get comfortable in the chair, “I was a bishop in Myra, a fishing town over on the coast of the Mediterranean. It was a beautiful place—for anyone who doesn’t mind the smell of fish that is.”

“What’s a bishop?” the child asked.

“Oh, a bishop is a wonderful job. A bishop gets to help people understand all about God and his marvelous ways.”

“Like they do in church?”

“Yes. In fact, I had a church, a very beautiful church, and people came every Sunday morning. Many came every Wednesday morning too, and I loved presiding over those services, but you know, after a while, I found I loved doing something else even better.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, the folks that came to my church were my friends and they were also the Lord’s friends as well. They all knew what Christ had done for them and I loved the time we spent together. One day, though, I had an experience that changed my view of life. It was early afternoon and I was heading down to the edge of the sea, having just bought a loaf of bread from the baker, with the

intention of having a quiet lunch while enjoying the ocean breeze. (We ate a lot of bread in those days.) Anyway, as I was sitting eating my bread, I began to think about the fisherman down below who were busy fixing their nets and unloading their cargo. I realized that I didn’t know them, and that meant they may not know the wonderful love of God that I was celebrating in my church every week!

“I suddenly thought to myself, ‘How can I go back to my church next Sunday and celebrate the blessings I have, when these men might have none of them?’ I realized it was no different then gorging myself on a roast pigeon while seated in front of a starving man. How could I do this?”

“Ewww, “ said the boy, as he squinched his nose, “you would never eat a pigeon, that’s gross.”

“What was I thinking? I realized that it would be like eating a whole pizza by myself while sitting in front of a starving man—and not letting him have any. Does that sound better?”

“Much, and you are right, that wouldn’t be very nice. So what did you do?”

“Well, I got on my feet, and headed down the hill to make some new friends.”

“Did you tell them all about Jesus?” the boy asked.

“I learned a long time ago,” I said as I responded, “that just telling people about Jesus, doesn’t always help them to understand about Jesus.”

“Huhh?”

“You see, sometimes people need to first understand what a friend is, and they need to first understand what love is, before they’ll really understand about Jesus.

“For example, I could tell you what being punched in the nose is, but until you get punched in the nose, you don’t really understand.”

“My sister punched me in the nose once,” the boy said.

“Oh good, then you get my point.

“Anyway, I went down to the sea and tried to share a few kind words with the men there, but they were terribly busy with their work. They had just pulled into the dock after the morning’s fishing and were loading up their catch for market. But then one older fisherman, who had been overseeing the loading, spotted me on the dock, waved me over, and offered to trade me a fish for the half-loaf of bread that I hadn’t eaten yet. I think he might have been joking, but we made the trade anyway and that became the start of a long friendship—his name was Dorian, and it was through Dorian that I was introduced to many others in the fishing community.”

“Did you get to tell Dorian about Christ?”

“Oh yes, over time, as we got to know each other well,” I said, as recollections of my old friend returned to me, “Dorian ended up asking *me* about Jesus—he knew that I was the bishop,

you see. With Dorian, I had been waiting for the right time to share my faith with him, but he ended up asking me first. Oh, he always had so many questions. It was that way with many of the sailors I met over the next few years.”

“Did they all start to come to your church, then?”

“Oh no, some did, some didn’t. Some thought I was just a foolish man, believing in God, but it’s funny how they always came to me when life got hard. And back in those days, life was hard. Life was very, very hard.”

“Why was it so hard?”

“Hmmm. For many reasons, really. You have lots of doctors that come look after you?” I asked.

“There’s a doctor that comes sometimes. He’s nice, but I don’t see him much, mostly it’s the nurses.”

“Well, back then in Myra, there were no doctors or nurses, and people wouldn’t have had the money to pay for them if they did anyway. If you were sick back then, it was your family that had to help you, but not everyone had a big family.”

“What did people do who didn’t have family?”

“Sometimes friends would help, sometimes they didn’t. This is why I said life was hard.”

“But weren’t you their friend?”

A question like that can make you like a young boy, I thought to myself.

“Yes, I was their friend and I would help when I could, but it was a big village, and they had more needs than I could ever hope to fill by myself. This thought pained me every day. I had some money, you know, but I knew that if people found out that I helped one person with money, then soon everyone would be at my door. Before long, I wouldn’t have anything left to give.”

I leaned over to his bed and said, “I know this because this is what I did in my youth. It was a wonderful thing to help so many people, but when my money was gone, I didn’t know how I could help any more.”

The child’s eyes popped open at this. “What? You gave all your money away. Who did you give it to? What happened?”

“Oh no, that’s a whole other story for another time. I’m telling the story about my unexpected visitor, remember?”

The child smiled, so I continued. “What I’ve come to realize, is that the reason we never have enough to help everybody is because God doesn’t want one person to help everybody, he wants everybody to help each other. That is the way he made us to be.

“Did you know that even Jesus didn’t do everything himself?” I queried.

“What do you mean?”

“You know that he died on the cross for our sins?”

“I know that ... ”

“But do you know why you know that? It’s because someone told you. You see, Jesus made twelve good friends when he came down to earth, and his friends helped him by spreading the good news about what he did for us. They did this by making new friends who also spread the news of Jesus, and then *they* made friends, and so on. So you see, Jesus was teaching us that we need to help each other. Of course, we should have already known that don’t you think?”

“I suppose so. But if you decided not to give any more money away, how did you help people?”

“You are an astute listener! Excellent question. Can you guess how I did it?”

“Did you do it in secret?”

“And a clever listener as well!” I remarked, feeling enlivened by the quickness of the little boy’s mind, “When I became aware of a family struggling through particularly hard times, I would take a quiet walk, late in the evening, and drop a few coins through their open window. One time a woman heard the noise and nearly came out and attacked me!” I chuckled, “I learned that night that I didn’t like jumping into fish crates to hide.”

“So you stopped giving away the coins then?”

“Oh no. No, I didn’t have to stop. I just had to be a little crafty. I found that in

a seaside village, people's feet get wet a lot and therefore they tend to hang up their stockings to dry. (They called their socks *stockings* in those days.) With a little effort, I could usually reach through their window and slip the coins into their hanging stockings and it wouldn't make any noise."

"You could always reach their stockings?"

"No, not always, but most of the fisherman's houses were small back then and so, more often than not, things worked out. That is, dropping coins in socks worked out, but, well, the truth is, I still felt that what I was doing wasn't making the difference that I had hoped to make."

"So what did you do?"

"Well, I began to think about why I first walked down to the fisherman," I paused for a moment, as I relived the memory, then continued: "I walked down because I knew that these men and their families needed the love of God in their lives, but, as I said before, I also knew that they might only understand his great love, if they first felt love through my friendship. As I thought more deeply about it, I began to realize that friendship is only one kind of love—a love that is an exchange."

"Did you know that when Jesus died on the cross, some of the people at his feet weren't his friends, but rather were his enemies? The very people that pounded in the nails. He sacrificed himself without expecting any reward, and that is what's so special about it. It is a *giving* love, a love that is one-sided

rather than the two-sided love that a good friendship creates."

"I never thought about that."

"Well, as I said, *I* began thinking about that. And after thinking about it, I decided that what I needed to do, was to introduce this idea of giving love. I figured that if the fishermen and their families could begin to experience this kind of love, and also know the love of friendship, then over time, they could more easily understand the love of God and eventually come to know him. If they came to truly know the Lord, then I knew their hearts would then be opened to reach out and help each other."

"Oh I know that evil things are in the world, of course, and I knew that not everyone would understand, but given these facts, I decided that I would start with the cleverest folks in the whole village!"

Intrigued, the boy asked: "Who were they?"

"Who are the cleverest people? Well, children like you of course! Children always understand love better than grown-ups, don't you know that?"

The boy smiled.

"So I had my plan and I began to save my money. For a whole year, I saved it. A tradition in Myra (and in fact, the whole region) back in those days, was that during a certain week in the early part of winter, people were *allowed* to hurt each other ... oh I don't need to go into it. It was a terrible tradition, but I

decided that at the very end of this week, I would demonstrate some of the giving love I talked about. I hoped that by doing this, people would see the difference between that terrible tradition and a love inspired by our Lord.

“Anyway, that first night, I slipped out of my home, very late, with a small bag of gifts for the children. Some small toys that I had made, some candy, and occasionally a few coins that they could give to their parents for food.”

“How did it go, what happened?” the boy asked eagerly.

“Oh, it was a wonderful time. Some of the people were confused and one of the parents even came to me in a panic because they were afraid that some toy-maker was going to come after them asking for money!”

“Did you tell them it was you?”

“Oh no, I couldn’t do that. The parents were in a tizzy for a while, but there was too much work in the village for people to spend much time worrying, and life went on.

“But,” I said as I leaned again towards the boy, “the children smiled. They knew someone out there was thinking about them.

“By the third year, people weren’t frightened by the unexpected gifts, in fact they were excited by them, but in the fourth year, something amazing happened.”

“What happened?”

“In the fourth year, I saw several children out playing with new toys. Children that I hadn’t visited!”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, I couldn’t give toys to everyone—as I said before, the village was too big and I am only one man. Yet, I saw these children with new toys. That meant someone else gave them toys!”

“Who else gave them toys?”

“I don’t know. But what it meant was that someone else learned about giving love and decided to give some on their own.”

“Wow. That’s pretty neat.”

“Pretty neat indeed. The fourth year was very special to me, but not the most special. The fifth year was the most special.”

“What happened in the fifth year?”

“It gives me the shivers to think about it,” I said, as a chill went up my spine. “I’ll never forget that night. It was bitter cold. It had started to snow the day before and it snowed all day long. I began to wonder if I should even go out, but the snow finally let up around half-past eleven. A foot of snow lay on the ground and my boots weren’t waterproof, but I decided to forge ahead with my plans. As it turned out, I didn’t have to worry about my boots getting wet. It was so cold that the snow crunched under my weight. The clouds had cleared and as I proceeded further into town, the quiet stillness of the night brought a sense of peace that

calmed any lingering anxieties I had of the night's mission. The moon's light shimmered as it reflected on the surface of the sea and high up in the sky, stars burned with a crisp brilliance. Under those beautiful stars, I criss-crossed my way through the streets, hearing nothing but the soft crunch-crunch of my shoes as I went about my business delivering the small gifts and I was chilled to the bone when I finally made it back home. I stoked up a fire and quickly stripped off my cloak and boots, exchanging them for a soft robe and slippers. My muscles melted as I eased myself into a chair next to the fire where I sat watching the flames flicker as I waited for its glowing warmth to defrost my toes.

"I was startled awake by a soft thumping at my front door. In my stupor, I didn't know what to do. It was late at night and no normal visitor would be out in this kind of weather. My first thought was to ignore the knock, but my senses got the better of me. It was cold outside, and while opening the door might put my life in danger, even a thief doesn't deserve to die in the cold. I pulled the latch, opened the door, and found the coldest man I had ever laid eyes on. A thin, frost-covered blanket draped over his body and he looked as if he might be frozen to the stoop. Grabbing hold of his shoulders, I pulled him inside. In the firelight, he looked at me not with threatening eyes, but what I can only describe as the kindest eyes I had ever beheld. The man tried to speak, but his near-frozen jaw muscles allowed little more than a stammer to escape his lips. I hushed him with a quick gesture, stripped off

his blanket, threw my own robe around him, and shuffled him into my fireside chair, as quickly as I could.

"Sit my friend' I said, 'I think words can wait for warmth, if that is OK with you?' A slight tilt of the man's head signaled his acknowledgment.

"It was some time before I could see the chill leaving his bones, and then some time further before he began to look comfortable. When I thought he was ready, I said 'You must be hungry.'

"You are too kind.' he replied humbly, 'I would not turn down a small bit of supper, if you could spare it.'

"*Too kind?*' I replied. 'I have never thought that there was such a thing as *too kind*. I do not have any food left in the cupboard, but ... , I do happen to have a loaf of bread and some wine. It was meant to be the communion elements for service tomorrow, but I think the Lord will forgive me if I share it with a good friend a few hours early, don't you?'

"The man looked up into my face. '*Good friend* you call me? You don't even know me, and yet you brought me into your house when I needed shelter. You clothed me—with your own cloak because I had no dry clothes to wear, and now you offer to feed me that which many priests regard as most sacred?'

"He paused, and then continued in a softer voice. 'I watched you this evening—out there in the cold. You went to many houses, not taking things, as a

robber might do, but leaving things. You are a very unusual man.'

"Perhaps you are right,' I responded, 'perhaps I am an unusual man, but I do not wish it to be so.'

"Why do you not wish to be so unusual?' he asked.

"You may misunderstand my words ... I do not wish to change. You see, what I do, I do in the hopes that others would learn how wonderful God's love can be. It is not that I wish to change; it is that I wish other's hearts would turn more fully towards God. Just as the Lord, long ago, turned mine.'

"You said a moment ago,' I continued, 'that most priests consider these communion elements as *most sacred*. Well for me, it is not the elements that are most sacred; it is the overflowing love of God that is most sacred. I have been blessed by God and I wish everyone in this village to have this blessing as well.'

"I looked over at my guest who was listening ... well he was listening as intently as you are now, and I could not help but laugh at myself. 'Sir, you have made the foolish mistake of asking an old priest about the things of God before the food has been served. My wagging tongue could keep your belly empty for a long time.'

"To which the man replied 'But there is more than one kind of hunger, in this life.'

"You know I had never had a guest quite like this man—neither before, nor

since. I picked up the wine, poured him a glass, and as I handed it to him, I explained what he clearly already knew: 'This wine—it represents a new covenant, a covenant in Christ's blood, which was shed for you.'

"My new friend took the cup in his hands, but then set it down on the table and picked up the loaf of bread which I had placed before us. He looked up at me and broke it into two pieces as he said: 'Friend, this bread is my body, which has been given to you.'

"As he said these words a fire burst forth from my soul and burned throughout my whole being. My leg muscles gave way and I collapsed down to the knees of this friend who I suddenly knew was my very own Lord and Savior. I had no words to say, I couldn't say anything or do anything, and I certainly could not contain the tears that flowed like rivers down my cheeks. After several moments I composed myself enough to utter simply 'Oh Lord' and nothing else.

"I felt his hands reach down onto my shoulders, then they surprised me by slipping under my arm and lifting me back up into my seat!

"Jesus leaned over to me and whispered 'Do you know what we did with the bread after I broke it that first time?'

"What a question. I was stunned. I mean how do you answer when Jesus himself asks you a question like that? All I could do was shake my head 'No'. At which point Jesus took half the loaf, dropped it on my plate, and said with a

grin, 'We ate it! We were hungry back then too.'

"He reached across the table, poured a second glass of wine for me, and then began to drink and eat like a man who hadn't supped in a long time. It turned out he was hungry after all. It was the most surreal moment of my life.

"As we finished the last few bites, the Lord turned to me and said 'Nicolas' ...

"Nicolas is my name, by the way.

"Anyway, the Lord turned to me and said 'Nicolas, you are living your life in the most beautiful way. Your spirit is precious to me—yes, it is. You have been living in me, just as I have been living in you, through my Spirit. Your gifts have made a difference in this community because they are gifts of love that awaken the hearts of the young and old alike. But, just as your gift of money ran its course before, have you wondered if this gift of your life will run its course as well? You are living a good life, but for men on earth, the days of life are numbered, are they not?'

"I felt foolish for not understanding what he was getting at, but by that time in my life, I had grown used to feeling foolish when it comes to knowing the mind of the Lord. All I could think to do was to answer him plainly: 'It is true and I know that I am nearing the end of this life, but I have come to know the people of this town, and have come to love them—even the grumpy ones. So I see each of my remaining days as a gift that I can share with them in the hope that their eyes will be

open. I know, though,' I sighed, 'that my remaining days are too few, and the need for you too great. It is impossible to think that I will reach all of them, but at least I can reach some of them.'

"Nicolas, what you have accomplished over the course of your life, many men would have considered impossible, and yet by relying on the Spirit which has been given to you, you have served well. Would you be willing to do more things that are impossible, together with me?'

"What a question! A sense of mystery imbued his words. Words that filled me with such an excitement as I had ever felt before. The instant he asked, I knew that I had only one answer. Although, it took some time before the jumbled thoughts racing through my head settled enough so that I could answer with any measure of coherence. 'Lord, my entire life has been graced by the Father with a knowledge of your presence, and I know you have blessed me tonight, beyond measure, by accepting small tokens of hospitality, allowing me to share back with you, things that I have only because the Father has provided them for me. I know that without you, I am not worthy to be with you, but yes, Lord, my heart is alive with the idea of doing the impossible with you. Oh yes.'

"Very well then,' he said, 'you have chosen to show gifts of love at a time of year when the men of Myra, as a tradition, do wicked things. Because of your spirit, our Father has decided to make this day of the year, a day that all shall come to remember his most costly gift to mankind. God loves traditions that

remind his children of his everlasting love and because of your great heart, Nicolas, God has chosen to create a new tradition to cover over man's old tradition of wrongdoing. It is true that most men's spirits leave this earth when their days are complete, but yours will return to join mine each year at this special time, to remind people what it means to have gifts given out of pure love. For your understanding was true: some learn to find me when their hearts have been softened through the receiving of such love, and many more learn to find me through the giving of such love.'

"With that, he stood up from the table, pulling me up with him. 'You are right that our Father has blessed you much, and tonight, we have been blessed by each other, but it has been a long night, and you are tired. It is time to retire for the evening. Go to bed and rest well my friend.'

"Imagine that," I laughed as I leaned again towards the enthralled boy, "the last time I was ordered to sleep it was by my own mother when I was hardly older than you are now. I didn't want to go to bed, I was conversing with Jesus himself! I wished the conversation to go on for eternity, but what else can you do when Christ himself sends you to bed? I had to go to bed.

"When I awoke the next morning, I rushed downstairs but he was gone. I sat down thinking that I must have dreamt the whole thing, but the idea that it had been a dream didn't explain the two plates and wine glasses left on the table.

"Speaking of sleep, it looks like you are ready for sleep yourself. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, but nurse Lilly should be here to check on me soon, she'll be here" he glanced toward the wall to check the time," ... oh, it looks like the clock stopped. It's still says it's midnight."

I looked up at the clock myself, "So it does. How curious."

"You said that you brought gifts to children, is that why you are here at the hospital tonight?" he asked, as he pulled his blanket up.

"I had thought so, but I found out a little while ago, that I was really here to receive a gift myself."

"I'm glad," the small boy responded, "even grown-ups need cheering up too. My parents are very sad, sometimes, when they come to visit me."

"Yes, I imagine they are, but I think you must have very good parents," I said as I stood up and prepared to go.

"I know who you are, Nicolas," I paused and looked back as the child hesitated a moment, and finally asked: "Do you think ... do you think I will live long enough to make a good friend-like the ones you talked about?"

"You already have ... this very evening. I think it would not be too arrogant for me to say that we have blessed each other tonight, but you are tired and it is time for you to go to sleep."

The child looked up at me with an anxious face, then relaxed, smiled, and let his eyelids close. It took just a moment before his breathing changed and I knew that a much needed slumber had finally overtaken him.

“Merry Christmas,” I whispered, as I tucked a small Teddy bear under his arm—a trinket that perhaps meant more for me to give, then for him to have. “May the Lord be with you on this very special night.”