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The Most Precious Gift

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

“It was the Christmas of 1949,” recalls John Smith, “and we didn’t have a tree.” As John shares his story, his dad had “as much pride as anybody and wouldn’t say we couldn’t afford one.” His mom said that even if they could afford one, “It was stupid to clutter up your house with a dead tree.”

Wanting a tree badly and thinking that if they had one everybody would feel better, John took things into his own hands. About three days before Christmas, John was collecting for his paper route. As he walked past a Christmas tree lot, the idea hit. He bought a tree marked down to \$10 for the \$8 he had collected. John recalls, “I dragged it all the way home — about a mile, I think. You can’t imagine how proud and excited I was. I propped it up against the railing on our front porch and went in.

“My heart was bursting as I announced that I had a surprise. I got Mom and Dad to come to the front door and then I switched on the porch light. Surprise!”

“Where did you get that tree?” his mother queried.

“It wasn’t the kind of exclamation that indicates pleasure,” John recalls. Very upset, she told him how irresponsible he was (to have spent all his money on the tree) and how he was just like his dad with foolish, romantic and noble notions. Angry and tearful, John stood there in shock. His mother never had talked to him like that before. Finally, she reached out, snapped off the porch light, and told him to leave it there. Even though his dad later helped him bring in the tree, and they decorated it as best they could, John recalls it as being the worst Christmas he ever had.

Fast forward... After John’s father died and his mom was visiting for Christmas, John was up late and found himself alone with his thoughts, alternating between joy and melancholy. He got

to thinking about his paper route, that tree, what his mom said and how his dad tried to make things better. He heard a noise in the kitchen and discovered it was his mom. This gave them a chance to visit. He told her how happy he was that she was with them and how he wished his dad had lived long enough to meet his grandchildren and enjoy Christmas with them.

She was quiet for a moment, and then she said, “Do you remember that time on Twelve Mile Road when you bought that tree with your paper route money?”

When he replied that he did, tears started streaming down her face and she cried, “Oh, son, please forgive me. That time and that Christmas have been a burden on my heart for 25 years. I wish your dad was here so I could tell him how sorry I am for what I said.”

The story of his parents’ financial stresses and worries unfolded and, gradually, the bitterness and sadness that had gathered up in both of them washed away as they talked. They cried, held each other, and John forgave his mother. “It was marvelously simple,” recalls John. It became their best Christmas ever!

Is there a gift of an apology or of offering forgiveness you want to give this Christmas?

Susan Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, and she is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

Author’s Note: See John’s full story at http://www.thoughts-about-god.com/christmas/js_giftof.htm.

