

A FEW SMALL GREEN APPLES

LOVE

Topping St. Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit is love. Of the many lessons on love that I've had in my life, the one that stands out was a lesson from my older brother Roger. The year was 1946 and I was 10 years old. Roger was 17. It was a couple of weeks before Christmas. The five of us siblings had been bugging my mother about when we would get a Christmas tree. The other homes in our neighborhood seemed to have trees and decorations up, and meager as they were we always had gotten a tree decorated a couple of weeks before Christmas. But this year was different.

Mom had had enough and had gotten us together in the kitchen. She was firm about it and explained that we barely had enough money for food, so we would not have a Christmas tree this year. Furthermore, since we should be thankful just to eat, we needed to understand that there wouldn't be any presents this year either. Now we knew how depressed our mother was. She had been able to work through the years of the Second World War in a munitions plant, despite her drinking problems and frequent absenteeism. She and our Dad had been divorced in 1941, and the child support and her paycheck were never all that much for us to live on. Now she only had the child support and couldn't get a job, so her depression was understandable. Nevertheless this news came as a disappointment to the five of us.

How could it be Christmas without a tree, without gifts under that tree? Plus there was in my mind at age 10 a matter of the embarrassment of the situation. How could I

explain to my peers that we didn't have a tree because we were too poor? Or what would I answer when one of them asked me "what did you get for Christmas"? The idea of Christmas looked pretty bleak.

My brother Roger came to the rescue. He had been my friend and a surrogate father to me. He had introduced me to the public library and the world of books, helped me with schoolwork, and unusual for a big brother, let me tag along on many of his activities. Now he had a special plan in mind and invited me, secretly, to be his accomplice. Roger worked at the stables just outside of our hometown. It was an after-school job, cleaning up and feeding the horses. He loved it because he loved animals and it meant that he could also ride the horses.

He needed what he earned to buy his clothing and schoolbooks, but he shared with me the "secret" that he has some money saved. It was just over \$7, which though insignificant now seemed like an awful lot to me then. His plan was for the two of us to go out and buy a small Christmas tree as a surprise for our family, but as a bigger surprise, also to buy each member a small present to put under the tree Christmas morning. I can't tell you how happy and excited I was about this turn of events. We first went to the "5 & 10 Cent" store and picked out presents for mom, our two sisters and little brother. Then he said to me, while it wouldn't be a surprise I could pick out something I would like. My eyes fell on a silver harmonica, and having fallen on this grew wide with excitement and anticipation. When we looked at the price and saw the considerable price of \$5 I quickly tried to say that I wasn't really interested at all. Of course Roger knew differently, but as each of the gifts had cost about a dollar and all that was left was a dollar that silver harmonica was out of

the question. What we did find was a model airplane kit, and this was something that Roger and I had done together before so it was a wonderful gift for me.

Having purchased our gifts we went home and hid them away. Then Roger and I went back out and found a small Christmas tree for the two dollars he had set aside for that part of his plan. When we brought that home, our mother was as excited and pleased as were our sisters and brother. We had a little party putting it up and decorating it. Now we were like everyone else in the neighborhood and a little more into the spirit of things. But there was one thing still nagging my 10 year old mind. It came to me that there was a present for everyone but Roger. Now I had no money, and at that point no way of earning money. Not being handy, I could not think of any way to make anything for my brother that would be worthy of being called a Christmas present. This really made me feel badly.

Then something of a minor miracle seemed to happen. Our school Christmas vacation had started and Roger got to go out to the stable to work some extra hours. It was a snowy and windy day as he rode a bicycle out. He found things at the stable in a bit of chaos and his boss a very angry man. A small, lively dog had gotten into the stable to take refuge from the bad weather and his barking and running had disturbed some of the horses. The boss and a helper had tried to catch the dog without success, since they only frightened it more and it was too quick for them. When Roger arrived and came into the stable the boss yelled at him to "catch that blankety-blank dog" and get him out of there. Roger being the animal lover and approaching this task with patience and gentleness was finally able to settle

the dog down and get it into his arms. What he did was tie the dog up outside the stables on a side away from the blowing snow. Then after work he brought the dog home. He told mom that the dog was lost and had no collar or identification, and asked if we could keep it. He promised to take care of it and feed it. Of course mother said "we will see", which even I at 10 knew was a form of probably not. But at the moment it seemed to me an answer to a problem, and an answer to my silent prayer that Roger could have a Christmas gift worthy of him. I should have known better. Our mother searched the newspaper ads and saw one for a lost dog, which fit the description of the dog my brother brought home. Sure enough, when she telephoned, the people were eager to see if this was their lost pet, so mom ordered Roger to take it to the address. It was their dog. There went "Roger's Christmas present," and my little heart was sad.

The rest of the story was a part of the **BIG SURPRISE** for Christmas at our house. Little did I know because Roger didn't share this with me, that the family gave him a \$25 reward for both his kindness to their pet and returning the dog. With that he bought a second present for each of us. You can imagine my joy and surprise on Christmas morning to find that each of us had two presents under the tree. Adding to that, you might imagine something I'll never forget, for my second gift was that silver harmonica that had delighted my eyes just days before. My mother and sisters and little brother were of course far more surprised. But in the midst of our joy and happy exclamations it hit me even harder that Roger was the only one who did not have a gift that Christmas morning. With tears in my eyes I went to him and hugged him and said, "Roger, you don't have a gift." He in return hugged me back with a huge smile on

his face and said, "Oh yes, I have the best gift of all, I have your love." That was a lesson in love I shall never forget, and has been a model for me my whole life. It was also a lesson in the true meaning of Christmas!

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