

## *Protagonist Corner*

### *Gift Giving: Pass It On*

William Avery Washburn

introduction by Mary Jane Cornell

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In 1997, William Avery “Bill” Washburn wrote the following letter in response to a sermon. Six years later, as Bill was dying of cancer, we discussed plans for his memorial service. Bill was adamant that the service should not focus primarily on him, but should be an occasion of worship—a time for proclaiming the gospel. As we talked, I remembered Bill’s letter, and realized that he had already written the sermon for the service. Shortly before his death on April 19, 2003, Bill gave me permission to read his letter in the context of worship. Following the Service of Witness to the Resurrection, countless people asked for a copy of this letter-sermon, and Bill’s wife, Marilyn, graciously allowed me to share it. As Bill said, “You can never repay a gift that is freely given. Pass it on.”

Dear Mary Jane,

Thank you for the word in your sermon Sunday 9/7. Please allow me to share a personal story.

In our culture of rugged individualism we don’t really understand gifts. Oh, we can be generous when the situation calls for it, but we return a plate with a new batch of cookies. It takes an unusual situation to learn how to really receive a gift.

The Belgian Congo got its independence June 30, 1960. I had just turned thirteen. Independence Day was quiet enough—all over the country there were parades, bands, changing of flags and speeches. But within a few days, tribal warfare had broken out. Instead of keeping peace, a number of soldiers in our town of Luluabourg broke into a beer warehouse and began to shoot up the downtown area. We heard reports of the same situation all over the country. Soon the U.S. and other governments were calling for their nationals to leave.

From our front porch I could look just across the valley and watch fighting, looting and burning in the city. Chaos was everywhere you looked. On the other hand, our station was quiet. The African church members (from several tribes!) had organized patrols to warn looters away.

Within a week or so (on a Sunday afternoon) the Belgian government sent in hundreds of paratroopers to secure the city for evacuations. The U.S. navy began evacuation flights from the airport (about 15 km across the city) in small planes. Our family left for the airport in a convoy led by the Belgians. We took two small suitcases with us.

There were hundreds of foreign nationals waiting for evacuation, so it took several days. We slept outside on the ground. Food was very short, but African vendors crept up to the perimeter to sell food. When money ran out, the vendors continued to come and give the food away.

On the second day, our “Baba” (the elderly African woman who cared for my sister and brother) suddenly appeared. She had crossed town on foot through all the fighting and had talked her way past the guards. She brought fruit and the set of stacking cups which my mother always took with us on trips. Baba knew this and did not want us to travel unprepared even if it were an evacuation. By this point my sister and brother were wild and my mother was frazzled. Baba said she would stay to watch the children while my mother slept. My mother told her that she could not pay her. Baba said my mother was being ridiculous and sat down on the ground with the children. She stayed with us until our flight a few days later.

We were flown to Kamina. We stayed in a gym where hundreds of sleeping bags were rolled out. Other missionary families from all over Congo were also brought to Kamina. After several days we were flown (courtesy of U.S. Army troop transport) to Salisbury, Rhodesia.

The Rhodesians were wonderful.

On arrival we were fitted for coats. (June is winter.) We were fed twice, to be sure no one was left out. We stayed the first night in a block of flats, whose residents had moved out to allow refugees to be processed smoothly. We added our thanks to the growing pile of letters to our anonymous hosts.

All the hotels were accepting evacuees. Our family was assigned an enormous suite just below the penthouse in a major downtown hotel. We stayed there several days. The hotel refused to accept any payment. After much discussion, they finally agreed to accept a tip for those that cared for the room.

We stayed with a family. The nearby library made an exception to their policy requiring residency. We had to renew the books each day, but we had plenty to read.

After a month, my father and several other missionaries returned to the Congo. Like many other families, my mother and we three children flew to the U.S.

We were met at the airport in Roanoke, Virginia, by a grandmotherly woman. She was the chairperson of the committee in Martinsville set up to welcome us. The Presbyterian churches and several other churches had prepared an apartment for us. On the trip to Martinsville, we poured out our story.

I vividly remember what happened next. Our hostess said that we must be very tired. She took us to the door of the apartment and gave my mother the key. She told us that there was a little food in the fridge; call her anytime day or night; her phone number was pasted to the phone in the kitchen. Before we could thank her, she had disappeared.

My mother opened the door. The apartment was furnished to the very last detail. My brother found the toy box at the end of his bed. My sister opened her closet and shouted, “Wow! My favorite colors!” and began to try on dresses. They fit. My dresser was full of clothes, including fashionably worn and rumpled jeans. My size. There were some model kits and several interesting books on the shelf. Best of all, there was a public library card in my name taped to the mirror.

My mother went to the kitchen. The pantry was completely stocked. The fridge was full. She grabbed the phone and called our hostess, “Please come, I need you now!”

In a few moments our friend was there. “How can we possibly repay you?” my mother sobbed. “How can we ever repay the hundreds of people who have helped us?”

Our friend laughed and said, “You can’t.” She asked us to sit down. She told us a story of how her family was in a desperate situation during the Depression and a man they barely knew had come to their aid. Her mother had asked the same question. The man told a story of how he himself had been helped and said, “You can never repay a gift that is freely given. Pass it on.”

Over the years, Marilyn and I have received many wonderful gifts. And we have been given opportunities to “Pass it on” and to tell the story.

The Doctrine of the Apostolic Succession may be half right. But I think that it is the many unbroken chains of gifts going back to God’s Gift which bind us all together.

How can we possibly repay God’s gift of unconditional Grace? We can’t..

Christ’s body, broken for you... (Pass it on.)

The blood of Christ, shed for you... (Pass it on.)

May God pour out gifts of ministry and preaching on you. May you and Gary be blessed in your work at DHPC.

God’s Gift is freely given. Pass it on!