

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Fruitcake

If you don't have good memories of the holidays, let's change that, starting now. I've been reflecting on holiday memories, both heartwarming and soul-searing, and I want to invite you to a spiritual practice introduced to me by our own John Sacco, who knows more than a little about suffering; transmuting suffering into compassion; and keeping the faith, despite having considered the facts. John says, "Drop your story."

When we drop our story, checking our baggage in the past, where it belongs, we can unwrap the gift of the present. Suddenly, there is the possibility of curiosity, and wonder, and real joy.

Recently, Arlington Street's Tim Kutzmark, now minister at our church in Reading, introduced me to an enchanting short story entitled *A Christmas Memory*, by Truman Capote. Until he was ten years old, Truman Capote lived with a family of distant and elderly cousins in a small town in rural Alabama. This could not have been easy. But his relationship with Miss Sook Faulk – one of those cousins, whom he called, simply, "my friend" – has much to say about the power of keeping it simple; the truest meanings of wealth and generosity; and choosing to make wonderful memories: our choice.

For all of us longing to leave the past in the past and to create something brand new, I invite you to settle in for just a little of Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory*.

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"A woman with shorn white hair is standing at the kitchen window. She is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a bantam hen.... Her face is remarkable – not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; ... and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid.

“‘Oh my,’ she exclaims, her breath smoking the windowpane, ‘it’s fruitcake weather.’

“The person to whom she is speaking is myself. I am seven; she is sixty-something. We are cousins, very distant ones, and we have lived together – well, as long as I can remember. Other people inhabit the house, relatives; ... we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other’s best friend. She calls me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880s, when she was still a child. She is still a child.

“‘I knew it before I got out of bed,’ she says, turning away from the window with a purposeful excitement in her eyes.... ‘Oh, Buddy, ... [h]elp me find my hat. We’ve thirty cakes to bake.’”

“It’s always the same: a morning arrives ... and my friend, as though officially inaugurating the Christmas time of year that exhilarates her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces: ‘It’s fruitcake weather! ...’

“The hat is found, a straw cartwheel corsage with velvet roses out-of-doors has faded: it once belonged to a more fashionable relative. Together, we guide our ... dilapidated baby carriage out to the garden and into a grove of pecan trees....

“Three hours later, we are back in the kitchen hulling a heaping buggyload of windfall pecans. Our backs hurt from gathering them: how hard they were to find (the main crop having been shaken off the trees and sold by the orchard’s owners, who are not us).... Caarackle! A cheery crunch, scraps of miniature thunder sound as the shells collapse and the golden mound of sweet oily ivory meat mounts in the milk-glass bowl.... Dusk turns the [kitchen] window into a mirror: our reflections mingle with the rising moon as we work by the fireside in the firelight. At last, when the moon is quite high, we toss the final hull into the fire, and with joined sighs, watch it catch flame. The buggy is empty; the bowl is brimful.

“We eat our supper (cold biscuits, bacon, blackberry jam), and discuss tomorrow. Tomorrow, the kind of work I like best begins: buying. Cherries and citron, ginger and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pineapple, rinds and

raisins and walnuts and whiskey and oh, so much flour, butter, so many eggs, spices, flavorings....

“But before these purchases can be made, there is the question of money. Neither of us has any.... [e]xcept for skinflint sums persons in the house occasionally provide (a dime is considered very big money); or what we earn ourselves from various activities: ... selling buckets of hand-picked blackberries, ... rounding up flowers for funerals and weddings....

“But one way and another we do each year accumulate Christmas savings, a Fruitcake Fund. These moneys we keep hidden in an ancient bead purse under a loose board ... under my friend’s bed....

“Now, with supper finished, we retire to the room in a faraway part of the house where my friend sleeps in ... [an] iron bed painted rose pink, her favorite color. Silently, wallowing in the pleasures of conspiracy, we take the bead purse from its secret place and spill its contents on the scrap quilt.... Neither of us has a head for figures; we count slowly, lose track, start again.

“According to her calculations, we have \$12.73. According to mine, exactly \$13. ‘I do hope you’re wrong, Buddy. We can’t mess around with thirteen. The cakes will fall....’ So, to be on the safe side, we subtract a penny and toss it out the window.

“Of the ingredients that go into our fruitcakes, whiskey is the most expensive, as well as the hardest to obtain: state laws forbid its sale. But everybody knows you can buy a bottle from Mr. Haha Jones. And the next day, having completed our more prosaic shopping, we set out for Mr. Haha’s business address, a ‘sinful’ (to quote public opinion) fish-fry and dancing café down by the river. We’ve been there before, and on the same errand; but in previous years, our dealings have been with Haha’s wife, ... [a] woman with brassy peroxidized hair and a dead-tired disposition.... They call him Haha because he’s so gloomy, a man who never laughs. As we approach his café, ... our steps slow down.... People have been murdered in Haha’s café.... I knock at the door ... [M]y friend calls: ‘Mrs. Haha, ma’am? Anyone to home?’

“Footsteps. The door opens. Our hearts overturn. It’s Mr. Haha Jones himself! ... [H]e glowers at us through Satan-tilted eyes and demands to know, ‘What you want with Haha?’

“For a moment, we are too paralyzed to tell. Presently, my friend half-finds her voice, a whispery voice at best: ‘If you please, Mr. Haha, we’d like a quart of your finest whiskey.’

“His eyes tilt more. Would you believe it? Haha is smiling! Laughing, too. ‘Which one of you is a drinkin’ man?’

“‘It’s for making fruitcakes, Mr. Haha. Cooking.’

“This sobers him. He frowns. ‘That’s no way to waste good whiskey.’ Nevertheless, he retreats into the shadowed café and seconds later appears carrying a bottle of daisy-yellow, unlabeled liquor. He demonstrates its sparkle in the sunlight and says, ‘Two dollars.’

“We pay him with nickels and dimes and pennies. Suddenly, as he jangles the coins in his hand like a fistful of dice, his face softens. ‘Tell you what,’ he proposes, pouring the money back into our bead purse, ‘just send me one of them fruitcakes instead.’

“‘Well,’ my friend remarks on our way home, ‘there’s a lovely man. We’ll put an extra cup of raisins in *his* cake.’

“The black stove, stoked with coal and firewood, glows like a lighted pumpkin. Eggbeaters whirl, spoons spin round in bowls of butter and sugar, vanilla sweetens the air, ginger spices it; melting, nose-tingling odors saturate the kitchen, suffuse the house, drift out to the world on puffs of chimney smoke.

“In four days, our work is done. Thirty-one cakes, dampened with whiskey, bask on windowsills and shelves.

“Who are they for?

“Friends. Not necessarily neighbor friends; indeed, the larger share is intended for persons we’ve met maybe once, perhaps not at all. People who’ve struck our fancy. Like President Roosevelt. Like the Reverend and Mrs. J.C. Lucey, Baptist missionaries to Borneo, who lectured here last winter. Or the little knife grinder who comes through town twice a year. Or Abner Packer, the driver of the six o’clock bus from Mobile, who exchanges

waves with us every day as he passes in a dust-cloud whoosh. Or the ... Wistons, a California couple whose car one afternoon broke down outside the house and who spent a pleasant hour chatting with us on the porch (young Mr. Wiston snapped our picture, the only one we've ever had taken).

“Is it because my friend is shy with everyone *except* strangers that these strangers, and merest acquaintances, seem to us our trust friends? I think yes. Also, the scrapbooks we keep of thank-yous on White House stationery, time-to-time communications from California and Borneo, the knife grinder's penny postcards, make us feel connected to eventful worlds beyond the kitchen with its view of a sky that stops.

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“Now a nude December fig branch grates against the window. The kitchen is empty, the cakes are gone; yesterday, we carted the last of them to the post office, where the cost of stamps turned our purse inside out. We're broke. That rather depresses me, but my friend insists on celebrating – with two inches of whiskey left in Haha's bottle.... [W]e divide [it] between a pair of jelly glasses. We're both quite awed at the prospect of drinking straight whiskey; the taste of it brings screwed up expressions and sour shudders. But by and by we begin to sing, the two of us singing different songs simultaneously.... I can dance: that's what I mean to be, a tap-dancer in the movies. My dancing shadow rollicks on the walls; our voices rock the chinaware; we giggle: as if unseen hands were tickling us.... My friend waltzes round the stove, the hem of her poor calico skirt pinched between her fingers as though it were a party dress: ‘*Show me the way to go home,*’ she sings, her tennis shoes squeaking on the floor. ‘*Show me the way to go home.*’”¹

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Beloved spiritual companions,

If you don't have good memories of the holidays, let's change that,
starting now.

Let's check our baggage where it belongs
– in the past –

and unwrap the gift of the present:
the possibility of curiosity, and wonder, and real joy.

May we keep it simple.

May we know the truest meanings of family and friendship,

¹ Truman Capote, “A Christmas Memory,” in *The Thanksgiving Visitor; A Christmas Memory*, pp. 70-87

wealth and generosity.
May we choose to make wonderful memories:

Our choice!

Let us create something brand new.

It's fruitcake weather!

Amen.