

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

December 24, 2018

Christmas Eve

## **Xmas Eve 2018 – *Why He Came***

(An adaptation of Willa Cather's short story, *The Burglar's Christmas*)

Two very shabby looking young men stood at the corner of Prairie Avenue and Eightieth Street, looking despondently at the carriages that whirled by. It was Christmas Eve, and the streets were full of vehicles; florists' wagons, grocers' carts and carriages.

The streets were in that half-liquid, half-congealed condition peculiar to the streets of Chicago at that season of the year. The swift wheels that spun by sometimes threw the slush of mud and snow over the two young men who were talking on the corner.

"Well," remarked the elder of the two, "I guess we are at our rope's end. How do you feel?"

"Pretty shaky. The wind's sharp tonight. If I had had anything to eat, I might not mind it so much."

"Got anything left you can hoc?"

"Nothing but my beard, and I am afraid they wouldn't find it worth a pawn ticket," said the younger man, rubbing the week's growth of stubble on his face.

"Got any folks anywhere? Now's your time if you have."

"Never mind if I have, they're out of the question."

"Well, you'll be out of it before too long if you don't make a move of some sort. A man's gotta eat. I am going down to Longtin's saloon. I used to play the banjo there, and I'll see if I can get a free meal. You'd better come along, perhaps they'll have enough for two."

"No thanks, I don't feel up to it. I'll just loaf around here."

"You sure? I don't like leaving you here. You shouldn't be alone tonight."

"Don't worry about me. You go along." And his friend turned slowly up the avenue.

He was miserable enough to want to be quite alone. Even the crowd that jostled by him annoyed him. He wanted the space to think. He had avoided this for a year now...laughed it off and drunk it off. But hunger is a powerful incentive to introspection.

This was not the first time he had been hungry and desperate and alone. But always before there had been something to look forward to. But not tonight. The reality was that he had failed in everything.

He was only 24 years old, had already struck out on his own, and this was what he had made of it. He could remember the hopeful things they used to say about him at college in the old days, before he had cut away and begun to live by his wits. But since then, he had never touched an enterprise that had not failed eventually. Or, if it survived his connection with it, it left him behind.

His last venture had been with some ten-cent specialty company that had gone to pieces in Buffalo, and he had worked his way to Chicago. As he stood there in the wet under the street light, he decided that the world had treated him as well as he deserved.

He used to blame others for his mishaps, but he was well beyond that now.

Tonight was his birthday, too. There seemed something particularly amusing in that. He turned up a limp little coat collar to try to keep a little of the wet chill from his throat, and began to remember all the birthday parties he used to have, which only took his mind to food - or his present lack of it. His cold hands clenched angrily, and for a moment he felt that bitter hatred of wealth, of ease, of everything that is well-fed and well-housed that starving men feel.

After all, he had a right to eat! He had demanded great things from the world once: fame and wealth and admiration. Now all he wanted was some bread. He looked around quickly and felt a new energy. In all his hard times he had never stolen anything before - he was above that.

But now he figured he might as well, after all, he'd probably fail at that too; and he could add it to his long list: "the failure as a journalist," "the failure as a lecturer," "the failure as a businessman," "the failure as a thief."

Just then a carriage drove up to the house he was standing in front of. Several richly dressed women got out and went in. The front door was open, and he could see down the hallway and up the staircase. The servant had left the door and gone with the guests. The first floor was all lighted, but the windows upstairs were dark. It looked very easy, just to slip upstairs to the darkened rooms where the jewels and trinkets of the fashionable occupants were kept.

He entered quickly. Instinctively he removed his mud-stained hat as he moved quickly and quietly up the staircase. He met no one on the stairway or in the upper hall. He entered a bedroom quickly, and closed the door behind him. The light from the hall shone into the room through the transom. The room was furnished richly enough to justify his expectations.

He went at once to the dresser. A number of rings and pieces of jewelry lay in a silver tray. Quickly he put them in his pocket. He opened the top drawer and found, as he expected, several jewelry cases. He opened them - a lady's watch, and a pair of old-fashioned bracelets; he seemed to dimly remember having seen bracelets like them before, somewhere.

Suddenly the door opened, and a woman stood in the doorway facing him. She was tall, with white hair, in an evening dress. The light from the hall streamed in upon him, but she was not afraid. She stood looking at him a moment, then she ran to him and threw her arms around him.

"Willie, Willie! Is it you!"

He struggled to get free from her embrace. "Mother—you must not! You don't understand! O, this is worst!"

"O, my son, we have waited so long for this! You have been so long in coming."

"You don't understand. I did not know you were here. I came here to rob—it is the first time—I swear it—but I am a common thief. My pockets are full of your jewels now. Can't you hear me? I am a common thief!"

"Hush, my boy, those are ugly words. How could you rob your own house? How could you take what is your own? They are all yours, my son, as wholly yours as my great love—and you can't doubt that, Will, do you?"

That soft voice, her warmth and fragrance broke his chill. He felt as though all his strength were leaving him. He held on to her and groaned, "O, mother, life is hard, hard!"

She said nothing, and held him back. O, the assurance of safety in that warm embrace. Then reality set back in.

"I don't see how you can look at me, or speak to me."

But she whispered softly, "This is my right, my son."

When he was calmer, she said, "Now, come with me into the library, and I will have your dinner brought there."

When dinner came, he nearly fell upon it. As he ate, she told him all that had happened during the years he was gone, and how his father's business had brought them to Chicago. "I was glad when we came. I thought you might drift West, and I felt closer to you here."

There was a sadness in her voice. When he'd finished, she led him to the chairs by the fireplace.

He sank into the depths of the big leather chair, where he had sat so often in the days when his feet did not touch the floor. That chair seemed to speak to him of things long forgotten. It was like the touch of an old familiar friend. He felt a sudden yearning for the happy little boy who had sat there and dreamed of the big world so long ago.

He sat looking up at this magnificent woman who was his mother. He remembered how proud he had been of her as a boy when she came to see him at school.

"Ah, mother, you must feel that I owe you an explanation. There are things I ought to tell you before I can accept your confidence like this."

"O, my poor boy, what does it matter? Have you wandered so far and not yet learned that love has nothing to do with pardon or forgiveness, that it only loves, and loves—and loves?" And she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

He sighed a long sigh of rich content. And as the chimes rang joyfully outside and sleep pressed heavily upon his eyelids, he wondered if the Author of this sad little riddle of ours were not able to solve it after all, when the dawn shall break.

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This is why God came to be born in Jesus. To show his love, which loves and loves and loves. And to provide pardon and forgiveness.

Christmas is much more than a celebration of kindness and generosity and family gatherings and meals shared.

Jesus came for everyone - and God's love is for EVERYONE, no exceptions.

May you live in and out of this love, not just tonight, and tomorrow, but every day and in every way.

Amen and a blessed Christmas to you all.