

Tommy was sitting on his favorite seat in the school bus, the one exactly over the rear axle. He liked that particular seat because, by sitting right there, he could feel through the springs and upholstery every bump and rattle of the route. It made the boy feel as though he were an extension of the vehicle. He became another black and yellow piece of metal riveted into the chassis. Sitting in that exact seat, feeling like a part of the bus itself gave the trip to school an exciting air of reckless adventure.

As he rode to his fifth grade homeroom class, Tommy relived once again the events of yesterday, his 11th Birthday. His parents had thrown a big party for him, a wonderful afternoon that climaxed with the breaking of a piñata. Tommy's mother had at first blind-folded him and then put a baseball bat in his hand. After turning him around and around until he was as dizzy as a staggering top, the boy started swatting the air with the piece of white ash wood. Guided by the voices of his friends who stood around him in a big circle, Tommy's bat had finally found the gaily colored paper-Mache' donkey, hanging in the center of the room three feet above his head. The bat smashed through the piñata with a crunchy "thunk!" A river of hard candy pieces wrapped in all the colors of a summer sunrise came cascading to the ground. The children in the circle flowed joyously inward to sample every flavor in the candy water-fall. Yes, thought Tommy as he bumped and rattled to school that next morning, it had truly been a marvelous birthday!

The bus pulled up to the long, low, ochre-colored building which was the middle school in Valencia County, New Mexico. The building was only a couple of years old. The county had been forced to build the new school in order to accommodate the influx of people who had begun flocking toward that region of the country. It was the mid 1960s in the United States, and air-conditioning had become a common-place technology in American homes. Suddenly, the arid Southwest that just a few years ago had been considered a desolate back-water, this hot, dry region had now become hugely popular. A steady stream of people began moving there to build homes on the high desert ground, something now made desirable by the invention of refrigerated air. Tommy's father was a contractor, and his business had flourished with the tremendous demand for houses in the bedroom communities of Valencia County, just outside Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

The school bus finally rattled to a stop in the parking lot, and the driver pulled the stainless-steel lever which swung open the metal and glass double-doors at the front. The children rocketed down to the parking lot and past the principal, Mrs. Swanson, who met each school bus every morning of the year regardless of the weather. After home-room, the students began their regimen of morning classes, a rhythm broken only by a half-hour of freedom during the recess of 10:00 AM. Then, the bell rang for lunch at 11:45, and Tommy went back to home-room to pick up his blue, red, and green lunch-box with a picture of The Incredible Hulk blazoned across the top. The boy trotted down to the lunchroom at the far end of the hallway. He greeted a group of his friends, many of whom had been at his birthday party the day before. Tommy had only just sat down at their usual table and opened the buckles of his lunchbox when a "crash" made him jump in his seat and turn around.

Gazing toward the noise, three tables across the room Tommy saw a group of sixth and seventh grade boys standing with their arms crossed, smirking at a small, brown child who was seated by himself at a lunch table. Tommy knew that the little, dark-skinned boy was called "Lito." Tommy did *not* know that this was short for "Emmanuelito." Nor did Tommy know that

Lito was the elder child of a Mexican-American couple who lived about a half mile from Tommy's house. There were many of these brown-skinned families who were now a part of the newly established communities which were springing up all around the Southwest. They usually earned their living either building the houses for which there was now such a demand, or cleaning those same houses once they were finished.

And these descendents of the original inhabitants of the Southwestern U.S. were not always welcomed by the families of the engineers and accountants and lawyers who had so recently migrated to the area. In fact, that tension between the Native-American families and the new arrivals had been the cause of the "crash" Tommy had heard echoing across the lunchroom. One of the more infamous sixth-grade bullies had just tipped Lito's lunch tray to the floor. The little boy's meager meal of beans and a tamale now lay in ruins near the overturned, half-pint carton of school milk that bled white onto the tiles. The sixth-graders were hungry for Lito to make some sort of response to their bullying. But the small brown boy just sat there with his head low, tears leaking down onto the empty lunch table. Mrs. Swanson, the Principal was nowhere to be seen.

And then, not really thinking about it, Tommy did something that would forever change his life. He reclosed his lunchbox and without saying a word to anyone, he got up and crossed the room to the table where Lito sat. Tommy picked up the lunch tray which lay face-up beside the ruined meal and placing the tray back on the table, he sat down next to Lito. He reopened the buckles of his lunchbox, the one with the Hulk on the front and took out the large, chicken-salad sandwich that Tommy's mother had prepared for him early that morning. Placing one half of the sandwich on Lito's tray, Tommy said "I can't eat all of that. Please, share it with me. My mom really makes the best chicken-salad."

One of the bullies made a move toward Tommy, but just at that moment Mrs. Swanson entered the lunchroom. With a sixth sense born of decades in the classroom, the principal immediately caught the tension at the table where Tommy and Lito sat, two sheep in the middle of a pack of angry dogs. The bullies immediately melted away.

Mrs. Swanson walked over to the table, saw the ruined food and milk on the floor. "Is everything alright?" Tommy replied, "Yes-Ma'am. Lito dropped his lunch tray, but Mom gave me too much for lunch today. So we're going to share." Mrs. Swanson didn't say anything. She just gazed at Tommy for a moment and then looked over to the table where the bullies sat studiously avoiding her gaze. The principal then looked back at Tommy and Lito, cocked her head for a moment and through a smile filled with the wisdom of her years said, "Well, that's good. I'll just go and get J.B. the janitor to clean this up. You boys enjoy your lunch."

Tommy and Lito didn't say much over lunch that day. When the sandwiches were finished, Tommy took out the small bag of hard candy left over from his birthday piñata. He emptied the candy out onto the speckled Formica surface of the lunch table, and the two boys spent the next few minutes sampling different flavors of the brightly wrapped pieces of hard candy. Just before the bell rang to signal the beginning of afternoon classes, Lito asked Tommy in a soft voice, "Do you think it would be OK if I took one of them home with me?" Tommy said, "Sure. I've got plenty more. Here, why don't you take the rest," and he pushed the little pile of candy across the table toward his new friend. But Lito shook his head, reached out and picked up just one piece of cherry-flavored candy wrapped in fire-engine red paper. Lito put it in his

jeans pocket. His chocolate colored face was shining in gratitude, and he said, "Thanks a lot, Tommy."

That was the beginning. Over the next few weeks, Tommy and Lito spent a lot of time together. They ate lunch together every day. At first, Tommy's friends avoided them. But slowly, they began to drift toward the table where Tommy and Lito sat, and after just a few weeks Lito had become a part of that magic group of children who grow up and make their world together. Tommy discovered that it only took about seven minutes to ride his bike from his home to the little house at the end of the gravel road where Lito's family lived. Lito joined in the baseball games that the neighborhood boys played in the community ball-field after school. He proved to be one of the best short stops in town, and soon Lito was always the first pick whenever they chose up sides. In fact, when Tommy and Lito graduated high school in 1970, it was baseball that got Lito a scholarship into a college called Loyola in a big city named Chicago.

Tommy went onto study business at New Mexico State in Las Cruces. He went into his Dad's business which he eventually took over and grew into a company with six different offices around the country. During college, Tommy and Lito kept up with each other through letters and a phone call every couple of weeks. They still got together during the summer when Lito came home from school in Chicago. And after graduating from New Mexico State, Tommy sat with Lito's family in the front row of the big Cathedral in Santa Fe, where Lito and six other young men dressed all in white were ordained into the Order of St. Ignatius of Loyola to become Jesuit Priests.

Lito and Tommy remained the very best of friends. In fact, it was Lito who – smiling hugely – officiated the marriage of Tommy to his senior-year sweetheart Denise, in the little church in Valencia in 1976. The wedding was just before Lito left for his new ministry with the Brothers in the Jesuit Mission to Central America. And it was Lito who flew home to New Mexico for a few days, to christen the two twin boys born to Tommy and Denise Cuthbert in March of 1978.

Tommy and Denise along with their twin boys sat with Lito's family in the front row of the little church in New Mexico once again, two years later in April of 1980. But this time nobody was smiling. Because in church that day, the remains of The Rev. Father Emmanuelito Maria Juarez, SJ were prayed over and laid to rest. You see, Lito had been one of 40 people, murdered in San Salvador at the end of March that year. They were gunned down in front of the National Cathedral as the Civil War in El Salvador climbed toward its bloody zenith.

After the funeral, back at the little house at the end of the gravel road in Valencia, Lito's grieving parents and younger sister MariChristina received the many family and friends who, in hushed tones, provided what comfort they could. It was there that MariChristina asked Tommy if he could step outside with her for a moment onto the tiny brick patio beside the small, adobe house. Outside on the patio, away from the crowd of mourners, Lito's kid sister gave Tommy a little box. She told him that, before returning to El Salvador and knowing full well what dangers might be waiting for him there, Lito had left the box with instructions to give it to Tommy if he should not return.

Alone on the patio, Tommy opened the box. He took from it a small brown envelope on which his name had been written in the hand he knew so well. In the envelope was a note on Lito's personal stationary.

"My dearest friend,

“If you are reading this letter, it means that I have gone onto be with My Lord. Do not grieve for me, for I am now in heaven having lived my life in the way God wished. But, I did want to leave something for you. In fact, I am giving back to you the greatest gift you ever gave me.

“Tommy, the value of things is not in their price but in their cost. In the Gospel of Luke, when the Good Samaritan stopped to help a stranger on the road-side, he was doing so fully realizing the unknown risks and responsibilities in which he was placing himself. The Samaritan knew nothing of the stranger he had found lying in the road. Yet he was nonetheless willing to tell the innkeeper to which he took this wounded stranger, ‘Look after him, and I will repay you whatever you spend.’ With his act of kindness, the Good Samaritan was in so many ways placing his own future and his entire life in jeopardy. He was opening himself to limitless liability, offering to pay whatever was necessary to heal a total stranger, a man he had never met.

“But this good man did so with the full faith that God will always provide. This then is the true value of a thing. Priceless gifts, the ones that cost the most are those actions which lead us to completely place ourselves at the mercy of God, knowing that Our Heavenly Father will always love and save us. And so, in the box with this letter, you will find the most precious gift you ever gave me. Though neither you nor I knew it at the time, this gift forever changed my life and set me upon the path God wanted me to follow.

“God be with you always. Your faithful friend in Christ, Lito.”

When Tommy had finished reading the letter, he looked back into the box in which the letter had been placed, and saw there a much smaller black velvet box about two-inches square. Tommy drew out the smaller box, and opened it. There on a piece of white silk, though it had faded a little with the years, Tommy saw a small piece of cherry-flavored hard candy, wrapped in paper which was still fire-engine red.

The Samaritan's Gift (Reflections on Lk.10:25-37): The backdrop to this story is one of the most tragic episodes in recent memory of American complicity in crimes against humanity. During the oppressive military regime in El Salvador of the 1970s and 80s, one of the only voices denouncing the atrocities being committed there was that of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass at the Cathedral of San Salvador on March 24, 1980 by a death squad organized at the direction of Major Roberto D’Abuisson and led by Alvaro Rafael Saravina. Assassins later attacked Archbishop Romero’s funeral cortege on March 31, killing some 40 mourners.¹

D’Abuisson was a graduate of the School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) in Fort Benning, Georgia which instructs students from South and Central America in counter-insurgency practices. D’Abuisson continued to command the activities of death squads in El Salvador well into the 1980s, reportedly with the support and the assistance of American interests. His interrogation techniques often involved the use of a blow torch on his victims, for which he earned the name

Pamela Merchant, “In Brief: Doe v. Rafael Saravia,” *The Center for Justice and Accountability*, ed. Scott Gilmore, CJ A, July 10 2012 <<http://www.cja.org/section.php?id=77>>.

of "Blow Torch Bob".² The sacrifices of Catholic Priests in El Salvador reached its most horrific climax early on the morning of November 17, 1989 when 6 Jesuit Priests and two lay people were murdered, execution style by an ultra-right wing paramilitary death squad.³ This decade of martyrdom in El Salvador furnishes the background for **The Samaritan's gift**.

The entire Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 really revolves around verse 10:35, "The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend'" (Lk.10:35 - NRSV). In this single verse, the Bible actually captures the difference between the confidence of this world and that faith which comes only from God.

If you watch children play together, you can quickly see how much faith they've grown up with. In **The Samaritan's Gift**, when Tommy sits down with Lito, he's actually demonstrating tremendous faith in the power of love. He takes the side of that lonely little boy against the mean-spirited action of the bullies because at home Tommy has learned the power of truth, and courage and love. He has learned to have great faith in those things, and sooner or later that kind of faith leads a person toward the loving face of the Father.



Detail from *The Virgin and Child* by Massimo Stanzione. This work combines the dramatic lighting of the chiaroscuro painting that is associated with the artist's native city of Naples, with the more lyrical qualities in the Bolognese painters of the 17th century. I've always thought that the expression on Mary's face is one of intense and faithful hope in God. (Louvre, Summer – 2009).

You may think the Parable of the Good Samaritan is about charity, but it's not. It's actually about absolute faith in the love of God. Charity is recognized universally as a virtuous value. You don't have to be religious to be kind. Even the most ardent atheist will almost certainly agree to the wisdom in sharing. The Good Samaritan could have simply rescued that poor fellow lying in the ditch, taken him to a roadside motel, given the desk clerk fifty bucks and been on his way.

But that's not what he did. Instead, this loving person actually commits to spending whatever is necessary to take care of the wounded stranger. He's on the hook for it, holding nothing back. He's all in.

By this world's standards such an action would be crazy. Doesn't the Samaritan have a wife and children at home? By exposing himself to unlimited risk for this total stranger, isn't he also jeopardizing the welfare of his family? And what about the potential lawsuits involved if

² Mark Zepezauer, "El Salvador: from the book *The CIA's Greatest Hits*," *Third World Traveler*, July 12, 2012. <http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/CIA%20Hits/ElSalvador_CIAHits.html>.

³ L.Hockstader and D.Farah, "6 Priests, 2 Others, Slain in San Salvador," *The Washington Post* Nov. 17 1989; Page A1.

things don't go well during the healing process? We could probably come up with dozens of reasons to question the worldly wisdom of the Samaritan's actions.

But that's the thing about the Gospel. It's gloriously crazy. It makes no sense at all by worldly standards that this perfect man named Jesus would go to an agonizing death for a world of broken people he never knew. That's really what Paul is talking about at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians (see 1Cor. 1:18-31).

For thousands of years, worldly wisdom proved useless in the search for God. So God chose to act in a way which completely defied logic. He came to earth through a birth that was impossible, to walk among us on a journey that was implausible, to die for us in a death that was unthinkable, to rise again and save us by a mystery which is unexplainable. No, worldly wisdom really has nothing to do with the story.