

## *So That Together We Might Be Whole*

Jean frowned at the Christmas cards waiting to be signed. How could she sign only one name? That was half a couple, not a whole. The separation from Don left her feeling incomplete. Maybe she could skip Christmas this year. After all, Christmas was supposed to be shared - and she had no one to share it with.

The doorbell rang. Jean cracked the door open, and found a green gift bag. Who could this be from, she wondered - and why? Tucked inside was a letter. No, it was a ... story.

*“The little boy was new to the orphanage, and Christmas was drawing near,” Jean read. “The other children told him about the tree on Christmas Eve, the candles and the delicious meal. And the mysterious benefactor who made it all possible. His eyes opened wide. The only Christmas trees he’s seen were through the windows of other people’s homes. Best of all - each of them would receive a treat. He’d get his very own ....”*

Everyone needs to celebrate Christmas, wouldn’t you agree - said the note. Watch for part ii. A faint smile teased the corners of Jean’s mouth.

The next evening, Jean rushed home from work. If she hurried, there was probably enough time to decorate the mantel. She pulled out the garland, but dropped it to race for the door when the bell rang. This time, she found a red bag.

*“He’d get his very own .... orange,”* Jean read. An orange? she wondered. That’s a Christmas treat?

*“The boy closed his eyes against the wonder of it all,” the story continued. “A tree. Candles. An orange of his own. He’d sniffed them in the marketplace. But taste one?!”*

The story ended abruptly, but Jean was sure more would follow.

The next evening, her pile of unaddressed Christmas cards was shrinking when the doorbell rang. The shiny gold bag left outside was heavier than the others had been.

This time, she read: *“Christmas Eve was all - and more - than the children had promised him. The boy watched in amazement as each child went forth and claimed an orange. Soon, he found himself in front of the headmaster.*

*“Too bad. The head count was in before you arrived. There are no more oranges. Maybe next year ....” Brokenhearted, the boy raced upstairs to bury his face*

*and his tears beneath his pillow.”*

Wait! This wasn't how Jean wanted the story to go!

*“The boy felt a tap. He raised his head and saw a napkin placed on the mattress. Inside was a peeled orange - a slice donated from each of his new friends. Together - the pieces made one whole fruit.”*

Jean's eyes filled with tears. From the bag, she pulled out an orange - a foil-covered chocolate orange - separated into segments. For the first time in weeks, Jean smiled. Really smiled.

She made copies of the story, then wrapped individual slices of the chocolate orange. She had visits to make. There was Mrs. Potter, the widow across the street, spending her first Christmas alone. There was Melanie down the block, facing radiation treatments. Her friend, Jan, single-parenting a difficult teen. Lonely Mr. Bradford. And Sue, sole caregiver to an aging mother. Perhaps - just perhaps - a piece from her might make one whole!

*(Chicken Soup for the Soul - Christmas Virtues)*

All of us know someone like Jean - struggling through loss and pain, looking for light to lead them through their current times of darkness - their wilderness of confusion and grief. Maybe **you** are like Jean - finding it difficult to enter into the spirit of this holiday season - feeling like you just want to skip Christmas this year.

It is not by accident in these Advent days that we hear the voice of God speaking to us once again through the prophet Isaiah:

*“Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God .... In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low .... He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”*

The Hebrew word translated in this passage as 'comfort' means 'to feel compassion for'. The English word 'comfort' comes from the Latin meaning 'to strengthen' - 'to give courage to'. For the Hebrew people during Isaiah's time, this was a word of hope. After years in the spiritual wilderness of the Exile - God was doing a new thing in their midst. And they were told to prepare the way - to watch with eager anticipation for the unfolding of God's plan for them.

And it is still a word of hope to us this morning - particularly for those in our families, our community, and our world, who find themselves in a spiritual wilderness - isolated because of their grief and loneliness - struggling in the darkness of despair, injustice, war and poverty.

*“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says our God.*

Sometimes that comfort comes when someone reaches out to us in caring and compassion - much like the anonymous giver in the story - or like Jean herself, sharing pieces of her chocolate orange as symbols of compassion and strength. It is the phone call to see how we are doing; the cards that brighten our day; the hugs that surround us with the warm embrace of a kind and loving heart. And sometimes, comfort comes when we stand in solidarity with the homeless, the abused, those struggling to make ends meet, those seeking a more just and caring society.

This is the comfort we give when we share with people in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver by purchasing socktificates as a gift for someone, or bringing in warm mittens, gloves, scarves and socks. It's the sense of solidarity we share when we support Ellen Coburn and the people of Huixoc in Guatemala with our gifts of money and prayer. It is the hope we offer as God's angels - God's messengers - when we help out at Out of the Cold, or support it financially. It is the gift of love we share when we give to the Mission and Service Fund, or to the Stephen Lewis Foundation - or to First United Mission.

These are just some ways to stand in solidarity and faithful witness with our brothers and sisters here and around the world, and offer comfort - the strength and encouragement that we are challenged to share in God's Word to us this morning. "*Comfort, O comfort My people,*" says our God.

As we share in Communion this morning, and break a piece of bread from the loaf, we are reminded in this act - that love is meant to be shared. And each time we do by offering

- \* Comfort for the weary, the despairing, the sad;
  - \* and strength for those with whom we journey through life;
- we are blessed by the sharing our pieces - so that together we might be whole.