

My name is Kyle Simmons, and my family and I rejoined Harvard Avenue Christian Church recently after spending a couple years in San Diego. We are so happy to be back here... back home. David asked me to take a few minutes and say a few words to kick off our annual stewardship campaign. To that end, if you will indulge it, I'd like to read to you a lightly edited version of Anne Lamott's essay, *A Ham From God*. The story begins on Anne's 49th birthday. She's miserable about it, her back hurts, and the world feels to her like such a disaster.

She decided to call her pastor, Tom, and complain to him. She says...

"He listened to me, gently. I asked him for some good news."

He thought awhile. "Well," he said finally. "My cactuses are blooming. Last week they were ugly and reptilian, and now they are bursting with red and pink blossoms. They don't bloom every year, so you have to love them while they're here." Tom loves the desert.

"I hate cactuses," I said. "I want to know what to do. Where do we even start to fix the world."

"We start by being kind to ourselves he said. We breathe, we eat. We remember that God is present wherever people suffer. How do you help? You take care of the suffering."

After we got off the phone, I ate a few birthday chocolates. Then I asked God to help me be helpful. I tried to cooperate with grace, which is to say, I did not turn on the TV. Instead, I drove to the market in silence, to buy my birthday dinner. I asked God to help me, again.

When the checker at the store finished ringing up my items, she looked at my receipt and cried, "Hey! You've won a ham!"

I felt blind-sided by the news. I had asked for help, not a ham. It was very disturbing. What on earth was I going to do with ten pounds of salty pink eraser? I rarely eat it. It makes me bloat.

"Wow," I said. The checker was so excited about giving it to me that I pretended I was, too .

A bagger was dispatched to back of the store to get my ham. I stood waiting anxiously. I wanted to get home, so I could start caring for suffering people, or turn on CNN. But for some reason, I waited. If God was giving me a ham, I'd be crazy not to receive it. Maybe it was the ham of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

Finally, the bag boy handed me a parcel the size of a cat. I put it with feigned cheer into my grocery cart, and walked to the car, trying to figure out who might need it. I thought about chucking it out the window near a field. I was so distracted that I crashed my cart smack into a slow-moving car in the parking lot.

I started to apologize, when I noticed that the car was a rusty wreck, and that an old friend was at the wheel. We got sober together a long time ago, and each had a son at the same time.

She opened her window. "Hey," I said, "How are you -- it's my birthday!"

"Happy birthday," she said, and started crying. She looked drained and pinched, and after a moment, she pointed to the gas gauge of her car. "I don't have money for gas, or food. I've never asked for help from a friend since I got sober, but I'm asking you to help me."

"I've got money you can have," I said.

"No, no, I just need gas," she said. "I've never asked someone for a handout."

"It's not a handout," I told her. "It's my birthday present." I thrust a bunch of money into her hand, all the money I had. Then I reached into my shopping cart and held out the ham to her like a clown doffing flowers. "Hey!" I said. "Do you and your kids like ham?"

"We love it," she said.

She put it in the seat beside her, firmly, lovingly, as if she was about to strap it in. And she cried some more.

Later, thinking about her, I remembered the cactuses that bloom in the desert when it rains, how potholes in the rocks fill up with rain. When you look sometime later, there are already frogs in the water, and brine shrimp reproducing, like commas doing the Macarena; and it seems, but only seems, like you went from parched to overflowing in the blink of an eye."

So may it be with you Harvard Avenue. Now, more than ever, this church, and this parched world needs whatever unique and unexpected gifts God has put in your basket to give.