

This is the story of two farmers, a flat tire, and a couple of leaps of faith.

In March of 2009, when I was still living in Minnesota, I had the chance to visit Sweden through a Rotary Foundation exchange. One of the highlights of my trip was getting to visit farms in Sweden, including one visit hosted by a young farmer named Erik. At one point Erik said to me, “I’d also really like to come visit a farm in the U.S. some day.” “Yes,” I said, “you should definitely come over to Minnesota some time,” I said airily. Without missing a beat he replied, “How about October?”

Toward the end of the summer he sent me an email and it was clear that he really planned on coming to Minnesota in October, and that he was bringing his friend Per with him. It was also becoming clear to me that they were not especially interested in seeing the kinds of farms that I had connections to in Minnesota at the time – small vegetable farms, organic sheep herds, dairy farms that sold milk in glass bottles – all the stuff you pay big bucks for at Whole Foods. What Erik and Per wanted to see was acres and acres of corn and soybeans and a really big combine.

I started wracking my brain. I had a month to find a big corn and soybean farm, and a place for these two guys to stay. I was thinking about this as I drove down to Kansas City to visit family over Labor Day. I was about two hours south of St. Paul when I got a flat tire – and I mean a pancake-flat, don’t-drive-another-two miles-on-this kind of flat tire. As luck would have it, I was just coming up to the exit for a town called Clarks Grove, Minnesota. I wheeled my car into the only car repair shop in town, and after a pleasant couple of hours in the Omni Automotive waiting room, I was back on the road to Kansas City.

At the end of the weekend I pointed my car north and started heading back to St. Paul, still thinking about where I was going to take these Swedish farmers. As I approached the exit to Clarks Grove, with cornfields lining the highway left and right, I had a crazy thought: “I bet there are a bunch of farmers in Clarks Grove!” And so on a whim, I walked into Omni Automotive for the second time in four days and said, “I was just wondering – do you know any farmers?”

Now here’s where it really gets good. John, the shop owner, says, “well as a matter of fact, Everett Thompson was just here – he’s a farmer. Hey guys, is Everett still back there? Send him up.” A few seconds later, a middle-aged farmer with a quick smile and a puzzled look on his face came walking over. “Are you a farmer?” I asked. I explained my situation and said, “do you think my Swedish friends could come visit your farm in a couple of weeks?” “My farm?”

Everett said. “Well, sure, I’d be happy to give them a tour of my farm. I could show them the grain bin and the machinery and the old milking barn, and if the corn is ready we could do some harvesting...” He seemed delighted that someone coming from halfway around the world would be interested in his farm.

But then in humble Midwestern farmer fashion he said, “but my farm is nothing special. If they want to see big machinery they should really to go to Brad Jensen’s farm.” By then, somewhat of a crowd had gathered in the lobby of the auto repair shop, and there ensued some discussion of the Jensen’s new STS John Deere combine, and other farms were mentioned as well, and here in the place where four days earlier I had come for a car repair, we were now putting together a farm visit itinerary for Erik and Per.

Then I said, “I’m also looking for a place for them to stay.” Suddenly the conversation got very quiet. It seems that welcoming total stranger onto your farm is one thing; welcoming them into your home is another.

I made a few follow-up phone calls to Everett and the other people he suggested, looking for a place for Erik and Per to lay their heads at night, but I just wasn’t coming up with anything. As their arrival date approached, I was starting to get nervous. Driving the two hours back to my house every night was impractical, and finding a motel seemed impersonal. I really wanted them to be able to stay in someone’s home. After several weeks of fruitless phone calls on that front, I decided that finding them a place to stay was the kind of job that would have to be done in person. So, I got in my car and started driving the two hours to Clarks Grove. I had gotten about 10 miles down the road when I had an overwhelming fit of self-doubt. Was I really going to just show up in town and ask these virtual strangers to invite total strangers into their homes? They’ll think that I’m either crazy or some sort of con artist! (And then, the more troubling thought -- maybe I AM crazy!) I pulled over at the next exit and started to pray. “God, tell me what to do,” I said.

It just so happened that in my Bible study we had been reading the Book of Luke, including this passage: “Take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there and leave from there. And as for those who do not welcome you, when you leave that town, shake the dust from your feet in testimony against them.” What I felt God saying to me, quite simply, was, “go to Everett’s house.” And what I felt was a sense of peace. If I was crazy, at least I was crazy like a disciple.

Now I had driven past this house once in my life two weeks earlier, after I met Everett at the auto shop and he showed me where his farm and his house were, and briefly introduced me to his wife. But I hardly have the skills of a homing pigeon when it comes to directions. Nonetheless,

I got to Clarks Grove, and I drove directly to the house, and I rang the doorbell and was welcomed in by Everett's wife and teenaged daughter. We sat at the kitchen table and looked at photos, and I told them that I was still looking for a place for Eric and Per to stay. Then Everett got home, and I told him the same thing. They were uncertain. They said that they would try to find someplace – probably not here, with our lack of space and a teenaged daughter in the house, but hopefully someplace. I thanked them, and drove the two hours back to St. Paul, feeling not much further along than when I started the day. I felt like I had reached the end of the line – I didn't have any more ideas.

As I got home and was walking in the door, my cell phone rang. It was Everett, calling to say, "We've found a place for them to stay. Our next-door neighbors have four grown children and lots of empty beds." My heart lept. It was all going to work out. And it did. That visit to Clarks Grove in the fall of 2009 was simply magical – one thing after another kept falling into place. It was also the start of lasting friendships among all involved, but especially between Erik and Everett. These two farmers have formed a special bond based on a mutual love of God, the earth, and big machinery that transcends age, language, and distance. Erik has been back to Clarks Grove for the corn harvest each of the subsequent two years, and Everett is hoping to take a trip to Sweden – his first international trip ever – soon.

It wasn't until we were actually in Clarks Grove, sitting at Sunday Bible study with Everett and Karina, that I learned about the conversation that they had had after I showed up at their house unannounced that Saturday afternoon. But before I get to that, it's worth telling a little aside about church. One of the things that I had learned about Erik while I was in Sweden was that he and his family are Baptist. In Sweden that's pretty noteworthy, as religious denominations other than Lutheran are just a tiny sliver of the population. When I told Erik and Per that we'd have the chance to go to church with Everett and Karina's family on Sunday, Erik asked, "are they Baptist?" I laughed. "Just playing the odds," I said, "in rural Minnesota they're probably Lutheran." So the conversation about going to church comes up at some point when we're with the Thompsons, and Erik asks, "Are you Baptist?" And they say "Yes!" I have managed to introduce farmers from the most Lutheran country in the world to farmers in the most Lutheran part of the United States, and they're all Baptist. What are the chances?

So we're all sitting at small group Bible study at the Clarks Grove Baptist Church on Sunday, and Karina decides that she should explain to the rest of the group how the Thompsons came to be hosting these Swedish farmers. People kept assuming that they were long-lost relatives or high school exchange students. Karina clarified that no, actually, it was all because of a flat tire. And then she got to the part of the story where I drove down to Clarks Grove that Saturday and showed up at their door. She turned to me and said, "we never told you this, because we thought you might think we were a little crazy. But after you left that day, Everett and I turned to each other and said, 'I think this is a God thing.' And that's when we decided that we really needed to

find a place for these farmers from Sweden to stay." I said, "as a matter of fact, that doesn't sound the least bit crazy to me." There are some times when life presents us with the most unlikely confluence of events that God is the most logical explanation.

I believe that it was God's providence that first led me to Clarks Grove in the autumn of 2009. And even though this is an autumn story, it's also a story that is fitting for Advent. So often we hear in this season, "it is better to give than to receive." But just like Mary and Joseph wandering the streets of Bethlehem, just like the little drummer boy, there are moments when we have nothing to give. When I showed up at Everett and Karina's house that Saturday morning, I was all ask. How humbling! We who are able-bodied and well-educated and financially secure have precious few opportunities to be beggars – to bring nothing to the table. Or as Jesus tells the disciples in the gospel of Luke, to bring nothing with us on the journey. What a beautiful and unexpected gift of friendship God created from my emptiness and need. And so I say – may we all be found empty-handed on Christmas morning, to better to receive whatever surprises God wants to place in our hands.