

BEARING GIFTS

Epiphany Sunday, a; January 6, 2008

[Matthew 2:1–12](#)

Stephen R. Montgomery

Prayer: Dear God, in the quiet aftermath, as life returns to normal, keep within our hearts the meaning of the gift of love given so humbly. And as we return to our routines, keep alive within us the startling truth of your love, for us, for those we love, and for the whole world. Amen.

One of the most beloved Christmas stories of all is “Gifts of the Magi,” by O. Henry, the master of the surprise ending.

The story is about Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young. Jim and Della are in their early 20’s, trying to make it in tough times, living in a shabby tenement flat in New York. Jim’s wages have just been cut. It’s Christmas. Della has been saving up for months and now has \$1.87 to buy a present for her husband. Jim has no money to buy a present for her. Listen to how O. Henry describes the situation:

“Now there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim’s gold watch that had been his father’s and his grandfather’s. The other was Della’s hair.

“Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry and mocked at Her Majesty’s jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard with envy.”

To make this short story shorter, Della ended up going to a hair goods shop and selling her hair for \$20 to buy the perfect gift for her beloved, a platinum chain for his gold watch. It cost \$21. Perfect!

She went home, prepared dinner, eagerly awaiting Jim’s return, worried now about his reaction to her new look.

O. Henry writes: When Jim arrived he stopped, stared at her—stunned. “Your hair,” he said. “It’s gone.”

“Yes, Della said. ‘It’s sold and gone.’

“Out of his trance Jim seemed to quickly wake...Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table ...”

Della tore at the string and paper—her cry of joy changed to tears ...

“For there lay the Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shells, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.”

“But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say “My hair grows so fast, Jim!”

“Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull, precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit...

“Isn’t it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You’ll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it.”

“Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

“Dell, said he, let’s put our Christmas presents away and keep ‘em a while. They’re too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs...”¹

There is required, both an art and a science in the giving of gifts and in the receiving of gifts. And the brilliance of O. Henry’s story is that Jim and Della have both. They know how to give and they know how to receive.

Children, I think sometimes, are born with both instincts. How often do kids just naturally draw a picture and give it to someone. It’s not for themselves. It’s only natural that it’s for someone else. And the response to being the recipient of that perfect gift is sheer delight.

But then it becomes very big business—gift-giving, that is, especially at Christmas. Retailers make it or don’t make it for the year based on sales for the past four weeks. When I was in India on Christmas Eve, there was an article in the English speaking paper on how commercialized Christmas has become ... in the Hindu country of India!

And all of it is an expanded variation on a theme first sounded 2,000 years ago when Magi—the 3 wise men of tradition—arrived to pay homage to the new born king and gave him precious gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Their story is surrounded by myth developed through the years (tradition has it that there were 3, but the Bible doesn’t state that.) And they weren’t really kings, but magi, or astrologers. But all of that doesn’t matter because sometimes art and music and legend and religious myth speak truth just as powerfully as fact.

Magi were the first century equivalent of consultants. Kings called on them for advice before military adventures; people in business asked their advice about investing. They were consulted on matters of romance and family, generally by looking at the heavens.

And now the heavens showed something unusual. These magi determined that a star portended the birth of a new king. So they did the logical thing. They went to King Herod and asked him if a new king had been born.

Not exactly a wise move. Herod was a great king of the Jews, one of history’s most productive builders. He had built entire new cities and palaces. But he was also incredibly cruel and paranoid. When he murdered members of his own family, Caesar Augustus said “I’d rather be Herod’s pig than his son.”

There is nothing more to be feared than a frightened despot. “When Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him,” Matthew tells us. So he summoned the religious authorities and asked “Now suppose this is true. Where would a king be likely born?” And they quoted Scripture: “And you, O Bethlehem, from you shall come a ruler.”

And so he pointed the Magi toward Bethlehem to find the newly born king. When they find the baby, they do the most astonishing thing—they give him wonderful gifts.

As I said earlier, there is an art in receiving gifts. I wonder what Mary and Joseph did with the gold, frankincense and myrrh. These weren’t exactly baby gifts—not baby rattles or cute little outfits to wear, not books by which he could learn to read. I wonder if they used the gifts to buy a camel for the long trip down to Egypt. We don’t know. But one thing I am fairly certain of, and that is that Mary did not say what you and I say when we are given a wonderfully generous gift—“Oh, you shouldn’t have!”

Have you ever thought about the way we respond to gifts? It is more blessed to give than to receive, Jesus said, and most of us have discovered that. But we also know that it is, in some ways, easier, and that we are better at giving than receiving.

It’s hard sometimes for us to even receive a compliment. “You look nice today.” “No I don’t, I look awful.” “That’s a pretty coat.” “No, it’s just something I picked up at a rummage sale.”

In a way it’s a spiritual problem. I’ve never heard a child say “Oh, you shouldn’t have.” But I’ve said it, and I regret it. It’s hard for some of us to receive. And it’s a spiritual problem because we might be saying “I don’t want to be obligated to you.” “I don’t want to have to respond to your generosity.” Or, “I really don’t want to get this close.” Or perhaps we’re saying “I really don’t deserve this. I’m not good enough for this gift.”

I have given this a lot of thought over the past two weeks as our family journeyed afar to the east, to Nepal to visit our daughter Sumita’s homeland. I certainly won’t bore you with all the details...a visit to the Taj Mahal, an elephant safari through a preserve where we saw rhinos and monkeys and crocodiles and all sorts of other wild animals, a trek up a mountain at 5:30 a.m. to see the sunrise reflecting on the snow-capped Himalayas, a trip down a river in a canoe where we then embarked on a trek through an unspoiled jungle; a visit to a Buddhist temple called the monkey temple (for obvious reasons, once you get there) on a mountain overlooking Kathmandu, a walk through several “off the beaten track” villages where we stepped back several centuries in time. Other than that it was pretty uneventful. Except for the last night.

We visited the orphanage where our host, Ashis, and his wife Sumi, are parents. Not house-parents, but parents of 11 beautiful, happy and healthy Nepali girls from the ages of 8 to 18. All of them spoke English. The oldest girl, Smita, is studying to be a nurse. The orphanage was started by Ashis’ uncle Silas, who was the friend who facilitated our adoption of Sumita 14 years ago. He and his family now live in California, having fled Nepal during the Maoist uprising several years ago. Ashis, our host, has an M.B.A., received a fellowship to study in South Korea, worked for a multi-national corporation in Dubai, and gave all that up to become the father to these girls.

They invited us over for dinner on our final night, and the four of us visited with Ashis and Sumi for a while when Sumi suggested that AJ and Sumita go downstairs and meet the girls. They did, and for the next 45 minutes we kept hearing all of this giggling and laughing, so we finally went down to see what was going on. They were all seated in a circle, playing games that AJ and Sumita had learned at Montreat, and the girls in turn taught AJ and Sumita some games.

And that night I couldn't sleep. How do I respond to such a gift of an experience like that? "Oh, God, you really shouldn't have?" How do I thank God for the gift that our kids have in a church that has nurtured them and provided an opportunity to go to Montreat with a thousand other young Presbyterians across the denomination? How do I thank God that these 11 young girls, whose early childhood stories will break your heart, have found love and nurture in Ashis and Sumi, two fine dedicated Christians? How do I respond to these gifts?

The lesson of the magi is that they saw in this child God's love and grace given absolutely, utterly, with no conditions, no strings attached, no deserving to be earned: they simply saw a gift, an absolutely gracious gift of love, to which the only response for you and me is to hold it tightly and to say "Thank you"—and then open our hearts and our hands and give whatever we have."

Dear friends, I hope now that the rush is over we can ponder the gift, God's son, God's love come down—in a manger, given for your salvation. Ponder and be grateful, with all your heart.

O. Henry concluded:

"The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were of the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest. Everywhere they are the wisest. They are the Magi."

Ponder the gift, God's love come down to us, given for our salvation. Ponder and be grateful. And give your heart.

Amen.

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¹ Jack Newcomb, ed., *A Christmas Treasury*, p. 209-213.

Matthew 2:1–12 NRS

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: **6** "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" **7** Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8** Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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