

Paint Branch UU Church

WHAT GIFT WILL YOU GIVE?

A Service led by Barbara W. ten Hove—Dec. 9, 2007

Flaming Chalice Dedication — by Marilyn Pearl

Remember that giddy feeling you experienced as a child when your birthday, Christmas, Hanukah, or some other occasion was approaching, when you knew you'd be receiving gifts? That's natural, but what about giving? While we tend to think it's something we have to train/force our kids to do, I've been the recipient of enough dandelion bouquets and proffered bites of PB&J sandwiches to know that's not so.

But, as the years go by and much of the giving we do becomes less spontaneous, and increasingly a matter of expectation or obligation, we may forget the joy, gratification, even excitement that can befall the giver when those reasons are removed from the equation. I recall a time I was reminded of that.

My maternal grandparents had grown increasingly incapacitated as they aged, and finally their four daughters found it necessary to place them in a nursing home. As such facilities go, it was a nice one. They were together in a room large enough for their beds, dressers, a couple of easy chairs, an end table and their TV, so they were comfortable.

The first year they were there, they were brought to my Aunt's house when the family gathered for Thanksgiving. When another aunt drove them back to the home, I volunteered to ride along and help. On the way there, our conversation turned to Christmas, what we'd all be doing and where. I vividly recall my grandmother lamenting, "What I'm really going to miss this Christmas is having our own tree." After 60-plus years of marriage, each with its own Christmas tree, that was major.

I said nothing at the moment, but the wheels started turning. My grandparents had nine grandchildren, and at that time, about 10 or 12 great-grandchildren. How significant that

was, especially to my grandmother, is attested to by the bracelet which she wore everyday, heavy with charms, one for each of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The following day I called or wrote my two sisters and each of our six cousins. To those who had no children, I said, send money. To those who were parents, I said, depending on your kid's age and ability, make, help them make or have them make an ornament, anything you or they want, but it needs to be readily identifiable as being from that child. Put it in a box, gift wrap it, and bring or mail it to me by mid-December.

Maybe the most amazing thing about this whole story is that all of them came through, and on time. Busy mothers, or single guys living half-way across the country, with just two weeks notice—all eight sent packages or envelopes as requested. I used the money to buy a small artificial tree, a string of lights, a top ornament, a garland and a tree skirt. About 10 days before Christmas my sister and I packed up my three daughters, her two sons and all the decorations and ornaments, and went to visit Gram and Grampa.

Sis & I cleared off the end table, set up the tree, lights, tree skirt and top ornament. Then we opened the other bag. One by one, I handed each of the five kids a Christmas wrapped package to take to either Oma or Opa in turn. As each ornament was opened, oohed and ahhed, and wept over, my sister hung it on the tree. When all had been opened, admired and hung, we added the garland. They had their tree.

On Christmas Day, when we went to pick them up, a woman from the nursing home office stopped me in the hall and said, "Your grandparents have dragged every staff member and resident in to see their tree. It is just wonderful, they are so happy, and we are all so jealous."

I light the chalice today for receiving so much joy from giving, that it starts to feel like a selfish act.

[Special Music: *The Little Drummer Boy* by K. Davis & H. Simeone]

SERMON: What Gift Will You Give?

Barbara ten Hove

As a child growing up in a musical family, I learned many Christmas carols by going to church (of course!), singing them at home, and by listening to the many holiday records my mother collected over the years. My favorite of all of them was a wonderful collection of carols, familiar and unfamiliar, called “The Little Drummer Boy.” The title song, thought to be based on an old Czech carol, has a simplicity and beauty that made it an instant Christmas classic.

This song, like so many other Christmas songs, takes a piece of the nativity story and creates around it a new tale. It’s something I really love about the Christmas story. It’s wonderful how these very short descriptions of Jesus’ birth have spawned hundreds if not thousands of songs and stories and poems and paintings. Scholars consider the gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth to be almost entirely apocryphal and yet they are the most well known parts of the gospels. Perhaps it is simply because they are great stories.

In Matthew you get the star and Herod and the three kings. In Luke you get the angels and the shepherds and the manger. In both you get the birth of an unknown, illegitimate boy who grows up to be one of the greatest people to ever walk this earth.

You don’t have to believe that these stories are factual to understand the truth that lives in them. They have a lot to say and for generations people have imagined themselves or others like them in the stories. *The Little Drummer Boy* is just one of many that does this.

A lot of the Christmas songs and stories, like “The Little Drummer Boy,” seem to focus on gifts. Perhaps this is because gift giving has become *the* central element of Christmas for many people, including most Americans. In the last two centuries, what used to be a religious holiday has turned into a commercial one. Ask a child what Christmas means and most will tell you Santa and presents. They can’t help themselves. It’s all any of us

hear about from Halloween to December 25. Give, give, give! Or more accurately: get, get, get!

It's enough that I am almost ready to join the Church of Stop Shopping! Do you know about it? It's actually a group of people, led by the performance artist Rev. Billy Talen, who produced the 2005 documentary called "What Would Jesus Buy?" The Church of Stop Shopping challenges people all over the world to stop shopping and start thinking. Think about how much our consumer culture damages the planet and our nerves. Think about how little we really need. And think about other ways to share the love we feel for others through gifts that don't need to be bought.

I appreciate the Rev. Billy even as I'm not quite ready to give up the holiday shopping. I like some of it. Such as the little perfect thing you find for a special friend. Or the doll that you buy for a child who then sleeps with it every night for the next decade. I expect all of us could name a couple of special "store-bought" gifts that we'll always treasure. The first real teddy bear I got when I was about five on Christmas day still has a place in my home. I love the Jesus nightlight a colleague gave me a few years ago at our special "spiritual gift exchange." And whenever I look at my engagement ring I remember the Christmas Jaco and I made our commitment to each other. No, I'm not entirely opposed to material gifts.

But I do think it can't hurt to reflect each season on our tendency to place so much emphasis on the "stuff" aspect of giving that we forget the meaning behind the stuff. The gifts we love are usually appreciated because the giver used a lot of energy to choose just the right present. Gifts that show the affection and connection between giver and receiver are the ones that seem to really touch us. The price of such gifts is truly meaningless. What matters is that the giver thought about the receiver and put a lot of him or herself into the gift.

This kind of giving is paramount in the famous story by O. Henry called “The Gift of the Magi.” You may remember this sentimental tale, published over 100 years ago [1906]. In it, two young people, deeply in love and desperately poor, struggle to give their beloved just the right gift at Christmas. Della, the young woman, wants so much to give her new husband a watch fob (an old-fashioned device to attach a pocket watch to one’s person) that she sells her knee length hair to pay for it. While she is doing this, the equally besotted husband sells his precious watch (a family heirloom) to buy her the perfect combs for her gorgeous hair.

When they meet and share their gifts, they realize what they have done. They have sacrificed themselves for each other out of an extraordinary love. And though the use of the material gifts is no longer possible, O. Henry reminds us that it is the love that matters far more than the presents. The last paragraph of the story goes like this:

...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 presents. 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 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 the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

[From *Norman Rockwell’s Christmas Book*, p.80]

O. Henry feels a need to repeat himself about these foolish children. For to him they are wise fools, giving deeply and truly out of a most powerful love.

I’d like to think that I am capable of that kind of giving. Perhaps I am. Perhaps we all are. But it’s hard, isn’t it, to imagine what kind of gift we can give that is truly a gift of the magi.

I've been thinking all week about what I want to ask of you, and of myself, this Sunday. I really believe that the winter holiday season can be both spiritual and fun and that we can find ways to give beyond the normal shop 'til you drop. If I believe this, then it's perfectly okay for me to ask of you the same thing I am asking of myself: what gift will you—will I give this year, that might be a real gift, a gift of the heart? A gift of the Magi?

To get us thinking about it, I offer you O. Henry's wonderful story. Marilyn gave us another great example of how gifts of the heart can touch all the people who experience them. And here's my personal story. Not surprisingly, it concerns a church.

The Christmas of 1984 was my last year in theological school and I was doing my internship at the Unitarian Church of Rockford, IL. It was going to be my first Christmas away from home and I intended to spend it with my significant other at the time (not Jaco). Well as fate would have it, I made the decision to end that relationship on December 21, the Winter Solstice. It was the right decision but the day still felt like the darkest day of the year it was.

A thousand miles away from my home in Virginia, only a few days before Christmas, I felt as lonely as I think I've ever felt before or since. The wonderful woman I was living with was leaving Christmas morning, but she invited me to at least wake up with her family on Christmas day. But I expected to spend a long lonely afternoon feeling sorry for myself.

But churches are remarkable institutions and without my saying much word got out that I was going to be alone on Christmas Day. Before I knew it, I was invited to join two families for festive meals. Both were special but the one I really remember was this. A couple in the church invited me to join them, their grown daughter and her boyfriend for an afternoon dinner. Turns out, the boyfriend was Chinese, and we spent the afternoon preparing a lavish Chinese meal. The daughter and her friend were about my age and we hit it off quite well.

By the time we sat down to eat this enormous dinner, I felt in the presence of friends. When I had to leave them (for the next meal—which, needless to say, I could barely eat!) I felt real sadness and absolute joy. They had, at the last minute and out of the goodness of their hearts, made Christmas for me. They gave me a gift beyond measure and I was no longer bereft.

Here's the strange part. I can't remember anyone's name from that lovely little party. But I have never forgotten the gift they gave me. Most of the best gifts we give to one another are rarely about things. The best gifts are made out of love.

I expect that many of you here today have similar stories of such gifts. I'd like to invite you to take a minute and remember the best gift you've ever received during the winter holidays. Bring the memory of the gift and the giving of it to mind. Allow yourself to experience again the feelings that gift gave to you. Now, if you choose, I invite you to call out those feelings to us all. *[They do so.]*

Yes, true gifts of the heart make us feel all these things (love, warmth, connection, community, friendship, family) and more.

Such gifts are rare, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't do our best to offer them to others. Our world needs the gifts of love and we need to give them. As Marilyn reminded us in her Flaming Chalice dedication, gifts of love bring delight to the giver as well as the receiver.

I'm going to give us a few minutes—as David plays some lovely music—to think quietly about the gift of the heart you may be able to offer this year. Perhaps your gift is a gift of time—spending the afternoon with a beloved family member or offering to shop for an elderly friend. Perhaps your best gift is a gift of letting go—turning off the TV and computer to sit quietly with your child reading a good book together. Perhaps your gift is

a gift of memory—sharing an old family recipe or making a scrapbook of favorite pictures. Or perhaps your gift is a gift of action—writing a letter to Congress on an issue dear to your heart or getting some friends to take a “clean-up-the-trash” walk along your favorite path.

Whatever your gift of the heart looks like, it is a gift worth giving. Take this brief time to imagine, plan, and maybe even commit to giving such a gift this season.

[They do so during two minutes of music.]

Now I’d like to invite a few folks, who are willing and who promise to be brief, to share your gift ideas with all of us. If you are willing, please raise your hand.

[The gifts shared included a commitment to give a family member childcare so they could take time off with a loved one, a financial contribution to a mother’s church, and a decision to support a food bank.]

These ideas give me hope that this holiday season will be a meaningful one for all of us. Yes, I expect we’ll be happy to get stuff that others give us and even enjoy the tangible material gifts we give. But I predict what we’ll remember about this season, which is what most of us remember about it each year, are the unexpected gifts of the heart that we give and receive.

I’ll never forget my miserable Christmas that turned into joy. Marilyn and her family will never forget the Christmas Tree that made her grandparents the happiest people in the world. You won’t forget the gifts of the heart you give and receive. Thanks for imagining, planning and maybe even committing to give such gifts. They, and you, will bless the world.

And let us bless the world with song—one of the greatest of all Christmas carols:
Hymn #244, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*.

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