

Christmas Eve 9:30 Service 2009  
A homily preached by the Reverend Diane Teichert  
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
“Gifts”

Note: A service of Carols and Readings  
(Luke 2:1-7, Luke 2:8-14, Luke 2:15-20 and Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11) preceded the homily.

So many centuries later, this birth story still captures the imaginations of young and old alike. It touches such deep places in us.

Haven't we all hoped that our own birth was hailed with love and excitement? Haven't we all once worried there would be no room, no welcome for us at our hoped-for destination—a new school, a new job, a new neighborhood, or with our new in-laws? Who hasn't been like a shepherd, following our heart's hope into the unknown? Who hasn't been like an angel, heralding excitedly someone else's great accomplishment or some wondrous sight for others to see, like a glorious sunset or starlit night sky? Haven't we all sometimes been like the magi, bearing gifts (whether they be gifts of the spirit or gifts that are things) with some trepidation, not knowing how they, and we, would be received?

So many rich Christmas stories have grown up around the Biblical account just read, of the birth of the baby Jesus, which is of course itself a great story.

This year, I'm struck by the magi's gifts for the Baby Jesus. And the giving and receiving of our gifts. And by the ways in which gifts are signs of love, and by the ways in which sometimes gift-giving gets in the way of love. And by relief that we all share by now: this being well after dark on Christmas Eve, there's no more time for gift-getting. Only the giving remains.

I'm reminded of a wonderful story about a gift that was not only a *sign* of love, it made way for *new* love. When I first read it, the author was not named, but I eventually found the author, Nancy Gavin, who published her family's story in *Women's Day Magazine* in December 1982.

It's just a small, white envelope. It has peeked through the branches of our Christmas tree for the past 10 years.

It all began because my husband, Mike, hated Christmas. Oh, not the true meaning of the season, but the commercial aspects, the frantic, last-minute running around, the overspending, the useless gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

So I decided to reach for something special, just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was on the junior high wrestling team. Shortly before the holidays, there was a non-league match against a team from a very tough neighborhood in the city, sponsored by an urban church.

Our team showed up in their beautiful blue and gold uniforms and brand new wrestling shoes. The other kids were ragtag, to say the least. They didn't even have headgear, the lightweight helmets designed to protect wrestlers' ears.

Our kids walloped them; they took every weight class. As each of their boys got up from the mat, he'd swagger around with false bravado, that kind of pride that hurts to watch.

It hurt Mike, who was seated beside me. He loved kids—all kids—and had coached Little League lacrosse, football, and baseball over the years. “I wish just one of them could have won,” he said. “They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.”

That's when the idea for his present came. I decided I would help to level the playing field, as it were. That same afternoon, I went to the local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes, and sent them anonymously to the other team.

On Christmas Eve, I placed a small white envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done, and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year, and for many years to come. Each Christmas, I followed the tradition. One year, his gift sent a group of kids with special needs to a hockey game; another year, a check went to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas.

That small white envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning, and our children, leaving their new toys for a few moments, would crowd their dad with wide-eyed anticipation as he lifted the envelope from the branches to reveal its contents.

The small white envelope never lost its allure.

The story doesn't end there. Last year, we lost Mike to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief, I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope in its branches, somehow comforted by the gesture. In the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed a small white envelope on the tree for their dad.

The tradition has grown, and someday will expand even further, with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation, watching as their fathers take down the envelopes. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

If you are someone who is wrapped in grief in this season, or for whatever reason are feeling out of touch with the Christmas spirit, know you are not alone. And know that the gifts of love you've given and received in the past have not lost their allure. They live on, for love always has the last word and is more powerful, even, than death.

And, waiting for you in the next days, hours or even minutes is a gift of love that you might give, that will be like the small white envelope tucked into the branches of a Christmas tree: one that is not only a sign of love, but makes way for new love.

Amen.