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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
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“A Theological Reflection on O. Henry’s ‘The Gift of the Magi’”

Dear people of God, today’s sermon is going to be different from the usual. I’m going to read to you the famous short story, “*The Gift of the Magi*,” by O. Henry, written in 1906, and then offer a theological reflection upon it.

[Read the story.]

Though written over a hundred years ago, “The Gift of the Magi” still sounds quite contemporary, doesn’t it? Jim and Della are a young couple in economically difficult times. They are very much in love, but very short on cash. They can hardly afford to pay the rent on their modest one-bedroom apartment. For Christmas, Della decides to buy Jim a chain for his distinguished pocket watch, handed down to him from his father, who received it from his father. It was the only monetarily valuable item he owned. To raise the funds to buy the chain, Della agrees to have her knee-length beautiful brown hair cut off and sold to a wigmaker. At the same time, unknown to Della, Jim sells his watch to buy

Della a beautiful set of combs made out of expensive tortoiseshell and jewels for her lovely long brown hair. In the end, each is disappointed to find their gifts useless. Yet each is at the same time delighted with those gifts, for they represent their sacrificial love for each other.

O. Henry ends his story by comparing their gifts of love with those the Magi brought to the infant Jesus. We might wonder just how practical the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were to a peasant Jewish family living in Bethlehem, about to quickly scamper to Egypt, and then return to their native Nazareth. But we must notice that the gifts of the Magi came from the heart. From there is where they derive their real value.

In the same way, Della and Jim's gifts were from the heart. They were a couple obviously facing financial hardship, but poverty could not overpower the strength of their love for each other. Wanting to buy her husband a wonderful present, Della is in desperation as it's already the day before Christmas, and she has only one dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was it. Not nearly enough for a fine Christmas present for her beloved husband. And sixty cents of that was in pennies, saved one and two at a time by haggling with the grocer, the vegetable dealer, and the

butcher. What is Della going to do? She doesn't know, and so, she just throws herself down on the sofa and starts crying. Have you ever done that in hopelessness?

We're not privy to the private anguish of Jim, but he too must be going through similar turmoil on this day before Christmas as he also cannot find the funds to purchase a wonderful Christmas gift for his beloved Della. Perhaps he too breaks down in desperation at some point wondering where he would obtain the money.

These two people love each other so much that in order to express that love on Christmas, each surrenders the possession that means the most to them. Does that perhaps move yourself to tears?

This young couple in poverty, nevertheless, discovers that they are indeed rich. Each is willing to surrender that which is most dear to self in order to enhance that which is most dear to the other. Such a demonstration of love and sacrifice is rare.

O. Henry was a writer known for his irony. But let's not overlook the irony of the original story of the Magi that inspired O. Henry. What is the significance of these gifts the Magi bring to the baby Jesus?

Well, gold we can understand. In the irreligious 1979 Monty Python

film, *The Life of Brian*, when the Wise Men show up mistakenly at Brian's birth instead of Jesus's birth, Brian's poor mother remarks, "Next time, bring the gold, leave the frankincense and myrrh behind."

Gold always comes in handy, doesn't it? Gold is always valuable. It's a gift fit for a king. But do we understand the powerful symbolism in that gift? Well, King Herod certainly understood. The Magi should be presenting the gold to him, Herod. After all, he's the king. What the Magi are saying by bringing that gift for Jesus is that they recognize the infant Jesus as the legitimate king of the Jews, not Herod. What an insult! No wonder Herod secretly plots to get rid of Jesus, and will leave no stone unturned to do it. He will soon order the slaughter of all two-year-old boys and younger to ensure that he, Herod, will remain king and will not have a usurper take the throne.

What about frankincense? What's that? Well, we see the word *incense* in it. Frankincense is a lovely, fragrant incense often used in religious ceremonies. The candles that decorated the Great Temple in Jerusalem were scented with frankincense. But the Magi weren't bringing frankincense to the temple in Jerusalem, though they could have offered it to the priests since they were there in the holy city. Rather, they were

saving it to present to the baby Jesus. By offering frankincense to him, they were saying that they perceive him as a great religious figure, someone worthy to be worshiped.

And what about myrrh? Well, myrrh may be the most ironic of all the gifts that the Magi bring. Myrrh was used for anointing, as in burial anointing. Myrrh had a fragrance like fancy perfume. Why would the Magi give myrrh to Jesus? Could they have known that this infant boy was destined to die a horrible death? It's possible. Their expertise was in astrology, in predicting the future.

But this story as found in the Gospel of Matthew is filled with other irony. Here we have three foreigners from Persia, non-Jews, who travel almost a thousand miles merely because of an astrological sign in the heavens that they believe signifies a king is to be born. They follow the star to find where the baby is born, bearing gifts to honor this "king of the Jews." They not only present gifts to him, but bow down to worship him as a god. Remember, these are not Jews. As far as we know, they know very little, perhaps nothing about the religion of Judaism. Yet they do what all Jews were supposed to be doing, worshiping the infant Jesus. Meanwhile the actual king of the Jews, Herod, and his Jewish followers,

who reside in the political and religious center of the Jewish people, Jerusalem, are desperately trying to find the baby Jesus, not to worship him, but in order to kill him.

But maybe the most ironic aspect of this story is something often overlooked. Because our Christmas traditions have concentrated so much on the gifts of the Magi, we have missed a more important detail, one more central to the meaning of the story. It's found in a single word that occurs at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the story. The word in Greek is *proskuneisai*, which is translated "to pay him homage." This word literally means "to prostrate oneself at the feet of a king." Those of you who come from Roman Catholic backgrounds are familiar with the custom upon entering the church of going down on one knee facing the altar before taking a seat in the pew. That's a way in the Roman Catholic tradition of paying homage to Christ.

In the beginning of our text, "paying him homage" (Matthew 2:2) is announced as the reason for the Wise Men's journey. It occurs next not on their lips, but on Herod's, who tells the Magi he wants them to report back to him when they find the child, so that he too may "pay him homage" (Matthew 2:8). Not only is Herod lying, but it is ironic, for Herod

unwittingly confesses what he should do, but has no intention of doing. This tyrant who rules by violence and fear needs to bow before the power of compassion and justice in order to offer himself to the grace incarnate in the child whom the Magi seek.

Herod's ironic lie helps us to understand why the Magi's quest frightened not only Herod, but "all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3). They understood exactly what the implications were of Jesus's birth as soon as they hear it. If a new king's birth inspires total strangers to undertake such a long, strenuous journey to an unknown location so that they can "pay him homage," then the power of the Herods of the world is doomed.

The Magi continue on their way until they find the child, and then something very important happens, something often overlooked in our traditions, pageants, and carols. The Magi do not immediately present their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The first thing they do upon entering the house is to kneel down and pay him homage. In other words, they give themselves. Only after this act of worship, only after giving themselves to Christ, do they present their gifts.

The order of actions is significant. First they offer themselves. Then

they offer their gifts. Worship comes first. Gifts come second. Before we can offer anything to God, we must offer to God ourselves first. Unless we totally dedicate ourselves to God, our gifts to God are little else than bribes to curry God's favor. Once we give ourselves to God, completely and unreservedly, we realize that everything we are and everything we have belongs to God, and there is nothing to hold back.

O. Henry didn't call his story, "The Gifts of the Magi," but "The Gift of the Magi," because the real gift of the Magi to the infant Jesus was not the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but themselves, just as the real gift of Della to Jim and Jim to Della was not the pocket watch chain or the fancy combs, but their sacrificial love for each other. Jim and Della come to know that overwhelming and eternal joy attaches not to material gifts received, but to the sacrificial love behind their being given.

In this new year, how can we offer "the Gift of the Magi"? Amen.