

EPIPHANY SUNDAY, YEAR A

1 January 2023

Matthew 2:1-12

In preparing for this morning, I wanted to begin by telling you a story that I've had on my mind all week as I read the lesson from Matthew. I could recall the details of this story, no problem, but I didn't know what the title was. My search yielded something quite providential; I'll wait until I've shared the story to tell you what it's called:

On December 10, 1905, *The New York Sunday World* published a short story by author O. Henry. It is a beautiful tale of a young married couple in love, Della and Jim. Despite having little money, they cannot imagine not giving the perfect Christmas gift to one another.

The story begins with Della, on Christmas Eve, counting what little money she has. Realizing that it is not enough to buy something wonderful for Jim, she shrinks down on their shabby couch and weeps. She has saved every penny that she could for months to be able to give him a gift that she felt worth to honor him.

Della suddenly catches her own reflection and realizes that she holds one of the two most prized possessions of her and her husband: the first being the gold watch that had belonged to Jim's father and grandfather; the second is her long, beautiful hair, which cascades down, falling below her knees. So, Della grabs her jacket and runs to Mme. Sofronie's hair shop, asking the owner if she will buy her hair. She does, giving Della \$20 for her lengths. Della goes out shopping and returns home with the perfect gift for Jim: a platinum fob chain for his heirloom pocket watch.

Returning home, Della takes out her curling irons to repair what is left of her hair, "ravages made by generosity added to love." She nervously waits for Jim to return home, wondering how he will respond to her new appearance. Jim enters their apartment and sees Della. She is terrified for not being able to read the expression on his face as he regards her; he is not surprised, or angry, or horrified, but has a peculiar look.

Jim enfolds Della before presenting her with a package from his overcoat pocket. She rips open the paper to find a set of pure tortoiseshell combs, with jewelled rims, given to adorn her beautiful hair, which she no longer has. She weeps with joy at Jim's generosity and gives him his gift of the fob chain. He smiles and tells her that he sold his watch to get money to buy her combs.

The story is called *The Gift of the Magi*¹. In a brief epilogue, the author writes that the Magi, who invented the tradition of gift giving at Christmastide are called wise men. But Della and Jim, who according to the ways of this world are unwise in their sacrifice of the most prized

¹ Take from: <<https://americanliterature.com/author/o-henry/short-story/the-gift-of-the-magi>>

possessions for one another, are, in fact, the wisest of gift givers. This is because love gives meaning to their gifts.

You see, Della and Jim give in response to love; i.e. they love, and are loved, so they give. The same can be said of the gifts of the Magi as Matthew describes them. Though they are outsiders; that is, they are not Jews, and they come from a far away place; the Magi nonetheless recognize that God has given the gift of a King. They come to Jerusalem in search of him, and when the star that they follow stops over the place where Jesus lays, Matthew writes that they are overwhelmed with joy.

Can you think of a time when you have received a gift that has overwhelmed you with joy? What was your response? Usually when we receive a gift, out of politeness we say, 'thank you'. For gifts that bring us great joy, our thanksgiving is genuine; a true act of giving thank. While greed leads to hoarding (think for a moment of Ebenezer Scrooge, or Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*), joy leads to giving (think of Scrooge's generosity at the end of *A Christmas Carol* when he is affected by joy).

God's gift of God's self in human likeness, to be with us, elicits joy. His gift enables us, and joy prompts us to respond to his giving by giving. The wise men, as you know, bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their offering is a response to God come down. These gifts are valuable ones, like Della's hair combs and Jim's fob chain, but like the gifts of these spouse to one another, the gifts of the Magi are given meaning by the receiver. Gold, a royal gift, is given to Christ, who is the King of Kings. Frankincense, used for worship in the temple, is given to Jesus, or sympathetic High Priest. And myrrh, a perfume used to anoint dead bodies, points us to his death, for us and for our salvation. Christ gives meaning to what we offer him in true worship.

Perhaps the most significant gift of the Magi is the one that Matthew emphasizes by repetition in our lesson today: that is homage. The wise men respond to God's presence with them by their presence. Christ is God come down to us, so the Magi come and bow before him.

This present of presence is something that Jim and Della enact in their own way too. Jim says to Della at the end of *The Gifts of the Magi* that they should lay their presents aside for a while and throw the chops on the stove for supper. Though most of the story centres around them seeking to pay homage to one another with expensive gifts, at the end of the day, the thing that they want most is to be with one another.

Following our weather-related delay on Christmas Eve, which after years of Covid-related restrictions has underscored what a gift presence with one another before the Lord is, we too can gather to receive the Bread of Heaven. We too can bow down before him and pay him homage. May we do so in response to apprehending God's gift of God's self this Christmas, being so moved by overwhelming joy. And may this joy be sealed to each of us as we depart from here today. World without end. Amen.