

The Wondrous Gift Is Given

Luke 2:8-20

Homily for 1st Sunday in Christmastide

December 28, 2008

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

Let me tell you a little story about that this morning ... an old, familiar story that goes something like this: A long time ago, when my grandparents were wee little children, in fact, a lovely young woman named Della was thinking about Christmas. Truth is her heart was just full of Christmas. And she was thinking of what she could do -- what gift she could give the one person she loved more than anything else. It had to be something special -- a wonderful gift. One that spoke from her heart.

And she had been working and saving every penny she could so she could give him this wondrous gift that would tell him how much she loved him and how much she cared. And she was trying so hard to save money ... Every time

she went to the bakery there on the corner or across the street to the butcher's shop, she would try her best to save a few pennies here and a few pennies there. Because all of those pennies add up.

And they did. They did. It's just that all the pennies she saved and earned and worked so hard for weren't quite enough. And now it was the day before Christmas and all she had was a handful of change ... and most of it pennies.

My grandmother told me this story when I was a kid. And she told me that pennies went a lot farther back then when she was a girl. But not far enough. Not for Della, that lovely young woman. Because this would be their first Christmas together as husband and wife. And Della wanted to give him something special that Christmas -- a gift that would say what she felt in her heart -- one that would show him how much she loved him. And such a gift doesn't come cheap. But it's costly. Believe me. That gift will cost much. And Christmas was only *one day* away.

Only one day, she thought. How could she save enough for the gift when Christmas was only a day away? Della started to cry on that Christmas Eve. And she cried and she cried for what seemed like hours. And then she stood up and

looked in the mirror. And she powdered her face, and took down her hair. And she took a brush and started brushing her long, golden hair -- her pride and her crown, my grandmother called it. And all of a sudden she stopped. And she knew. She just knew what she had to do. And she ran to the closet, threw on her coat, and ran through the front door and out to the street. And she ran and she ran till she got to the store on the corner. The one that sold hair goods.

My grandma sis that when she was a girl, she said. Because money was a bit scarce in those days. But there were some people, she said, who would pay a pretty fair price for a wig or a hairpiece that was made from some young woman's hair. So that's what she did, she said. Because they needed the money. It nearly broke her heart, she said. Because her hair was so long and thick, so lovely and soft. But hard as it was, that's what she did.

And so did Della. She sold her own hair, because she wanted to give her husband a gift. Not just *any* gift, mind you, but one that would say what she felt in her heart and show him just how much she loved him. Such a gift doesn't come cheap. But it's costly. So costly. But Della was willing to pay the price. So she went to the hair goods store and sold her hair for about twenty dollars.

And then she ran to the jeweler's. And she looked round the shop till she found the perfect gift for her husband. It was a chain, a little gold chain for a man's pocket watch. For the one thing Jim treasured more than anything else was his gold pocket watch. It had been a gift from his father. Which had been a gift to *him* from his father when he was a young man around Jim's age. But the chain had been lost *years* ago. And Jim hardly ever carried it with him anymore. Because a gold watch on a string is a little embarrassing. So that Christmas Eve, Della went home with a gift in her hand that was simple and lovely and nearly perfect. And she could hardly wait to *give* it, I think, this wonderful gift.

But she was a bit worried, too. Because her hair was so short. And in those days women didn't wear their hair short. They wore their hair long. And Della's hair was so pretty. What would Jim think? What would he say?

Della waited and waited. Excited and nervous. Ad Jim walked through the door and he turned and he looked. And when he saw Della he didn't say *anything*, really. But his face turned pale. And he looked down at the little package in his hand with a strange sort of look. As if somehow, whatever it was, it wasn't enough. But he placed it in Della's hand. And she opened it up. And there in the gift box

were two tortoise shell combs to wear in her hair -- a gift that was simple and lovely and just about perfect for such a lovely young woman with her long golden hair...

Della had seen them before when they passed by the window of one of the little shops there in town. And she loved them. She just adored them. It's just that her hair wasn't long anymore. But she held them and hugged them close to her heart, thanking Jim for such a wonderful gift. And she said, "Don't worry, dear... my hair grows so fast!"

And then she remembered the gift that *she* bought. And she took the little package and put it in his hand. And he loosened the bow and opened the box. And there was a chain -- a gold chain for a watch. A wonderful gift -- simple and lovely. Just nearly perfect. And Della said, "Isn't grand? Go get your watch! Put it on! Let's see how it looks!"

And when she looked up, her husband was smiling. And yet there were tears running down over his cheeks. And when she saw them, she knew. She knew what he'd done. He had sold the gold watch he treasured so much to buy two lovely tortoise-shell combs for her long golden hair. Over the years, Jim and Della shared many wonderful Christmases together as husband and wife. And they always gave gifts that were lovely and good. But on that

first Christmas Eve, they gave each other the most wonderful gift that they had to give. For they didn't just give the gifts that they had. They gave to each other the gifts that they were. For Della and Jim were each willing to part with the things in their lives that they treasured the most... just so the other would know they were loved.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

I love that old story. I can still remember sitting on my grandmother's lap, hearing that story for the very first time. And it reminds me of another story she told me then, when I was a boy. A wonderful story that goes something like this...

And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed...

And when Caesar Augustus "sent out a decree," people listened. And they did what he told them. Because he saw too it that everyone did. So people got moving. They packed up their things and went on their way. Because in those days you couldn't just fill out a form or write a check and drop it in the mail by the fifteenth of April. You had to go in person. To the clerk's office. At the county courthouse, mind

you -- or whatever it was they had in those days. You had to go back to the place you were born -- where your grandparents were born. Back to the place where they kept all the old family records. No extensions. No exceptions. Everybody had to go -- even fathers-to-be. Which meant, of course, that Joseph, the carpenter, had to go, too. Even though he lived up in Nazareth, now, he had to go all the way down to some little village called Bethlehem. Because that was the place his family had always called home.

Trouble is it wasn't such a good time for Joseph to be out on the road. Because Mary his wife was expecting a baby. And the thing of it is, she wasn't *really* his wife. Not just yet, anyway. So he wasn't too happy when he heard the news that she was expecting. Because he knew good and well the child wasn't his. But he loved Mary with all of his heart. So he kept the news all to himself. And he didn't tell a soul about it. Because he didn't want people saying things about Mary.

Then one night in a dream he heard the voice of an angel. And the angel, God's messenger, told him that the child was a gift -- a wonderful gift from a loving God. So when Caesar sent out his decreed and made everyone go to the place of his birth, Joseph went, too. And Mary went with him. And

while they were there ... well, you know the story. **While they were there the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.**

But Bethlehem was just a small village. And it was so crowded there because of Caesar's decree that all should be taxed. So there weren't any rooms at the inn. And they didn't have time to go anywhere else. So Joseph took Mary to a stable. A barn, mind you. And there in that stable the baby was born. And Luke says she bundled him up with strips of cloth and laid him down in a manger to sleep.

I'm sure it wasn't the first time a baby'd been born outside of a home that was cozy and warm. And it wasn't the last. (It would happen again and again, down through the ages.) But that night in Bethlehem, something was different. There were some shepherds, says Luke, out on the hillside tending their sheep. And all of a sudden an angel appeared. "Don't be afraid," said the angel. "I've come with good news! Good news for all people! For your Savior has come! He was born today in Bethlehem -- the old city of David. And this is how you will know him. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

And the shepherds hurried off to the village to see. To the stable, the barn out back of the village. And there they found Mary and Joseph. And when they looked in the manger, there was a baby asleep on the hay. And they went back to their sheep rejoicing and singing, lifting their voices to heaven above. For they knew in their hearts that the child was a gift. The most wonderful gift that could ever be given. And surely one of the miracles on that holy night was that somehow these common, ordinary, working class shepherds knew in their hearts that they were loved and adored beyond all human measure.

But such a gift doesn't come cheap. It's costly. It is. And yet, the God, the Giver, was willing to pay the price. **For God so loved the world** -- and you and me and those poor frightened shepherds -- **that he gave his only begotten Son.** He gave the gift he treasured most ... So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

It takes a lot of love to do something like that, you know. To cut off your hair and buy a gold chain. Or let go of something you treasure so much. And yet, that's what God did for all of us. For you. And for me. That's why he is the most wonderful gift that has ever been given. For God didn't just give us the gifts that he had, but in that little baby God

gave us heart, and he gave us his love, and somehow -- somehow, he gave us the gift that he was and the gift that he is. So that we would know that we are his beloved, the treasure of his heart. And of all the gifts that have ever been given, that's the one gift we want, and need, and long for the most.

But let me tell you one more little story, just to show you what I mean. A few years ago, a little girl became very sick just a few days before Christmas. And unlike the shepherds of Judea, her family lived in a wonderful house there in the city. And they wanted for nothing. Because they had been blessed -- or so they thought. But the little girl was sick. So they admitted her to the hospital just a few days before Christmas. Which is not a happy place to be, I think, when you're a little girl and Christmas is right around the corner. So everyday her family sent toys and games and beautiful gifts. And every time her mother came she would bring something new, a necklace, a ring, a new outfit, a doll. With *every* visit she brought something new. She'd dash into the room, give her little girl a kiss and some wonderful gift. And then she'd dash out to a meeting, a luncheon, a lecture, whatever. Because she was an important person in that community and there was so much to do.

And so everyday it was the same. She'd dash into the little girl's hospital room, present her with some expensive, lavish, wonderful gift, and then dash away as quick as she'd come. But one day she rushed into the little girl's room and she noticed that the child seemed sad. Even depressed she thought. So she smiled and handed her the gift of the day and said, "Look dear! Look what mommy brought for you today!"

But the child didn't look. She just took the gift and laid it aside. And her mother could see the tears trickling down over the little girl's cheeks. And she said, "Don't cry, dear. Please don't cry. Don't you want the present I brought you?"

And the little girl said, "No, mommy. All I want is you." L

That's what God did on that first Christmas Eve, in the babe was born in Bethlehem's stable. He gave the most wonderful gift that could ever be given. For he didn't just give you the things that he had. But he gave you his heart. And he gave you his love. And somehow he gave you the gift of himself. And that gift is yours to receive and to cherish and to share with others -- your friends, your family, and to all those around you.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son -- he gave us what he treasured most -- that whosoever believeth in him -- that whosoever would receive this great gift -- should not perish, but have everlasting life.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObISB

