

## "Unexpected Gifts"

Luke 1:46-55; Luke 2:1-7

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 24, 2016 – Christmas Eve – Rev. Ronald Botts

During the Sundays of Advent I have been relating some of the stories of Christmas... about a cowboy off to attend a dance who never gets there, but discovers something far more important instead. And an old man who never thought much about religion, but learns of it first-hand right outside his own door on a snowy night. About Christmas Eve in a dismal foreign restaurant where all the diners are equally miserable, until an American sailor brings a leaven of joy to that despondent scene and it changes the evening for everyone.

You may not have heard any of the previous stories before, and that's not particularly surprising; but tonight I'd like to share with you a story that will certainly be familiar to some of you. It was written by Will Porter, an interesting fellow who, as a younger man, spent time as a ranch hand, a newspaper reporter, a bank teller, and was also a licensed pharmacist.

Porter also lived right here in Columbus from 1898 to 1902 at the corner of Spring Street and Neil Avenue, but he never mixed much in society. He couldn't because he was an inmate at the Ohio Penitentiary, then also doubling as a federal prison, because of embezzlement charges stemming from his time in banking. This was a very unhappy time of his life.

Two things kept him busy at the Ohio Pen: working in the prison pharmacy and starting a new career as a short story writer. When he was released from incarceration he moved to New York City where he wrote hundreds of stories, mostly about common people, often at poverty's door, in that great metropolis.

To put some distance from his past, William Sydney Porter wrote under the literary name of O. Henry, and tonight's story bears this byline. Our tale is called "The Gift of the Magi."

The story is quite simple. It is about two people who love each other deeply. They are very poor and this particular Christmas they seem to have less money than ever. Yet it wouldn't be right to say that they are impoverished, for each of them still has pride and dignity. And for each that identity is symbolized by an object.

For the man it is a watch, an heirloom given him by his father, and given to his father by his grandfather. This prized possession has been in his family for many years and has sentimental value much higher than its worth in cash. It tells good time but, even more, it is a visible link with the past and with those whom he remembers with affection. He can never recall a period when the watch hasn't been actively a presence in his life.

The woman, too, has something she highly values. Not something given to her, but really a part of her. It is her hair. Long, beautiful hair. Hair that has been rarely cut, and that just to trim it back into shape. Her pride and identity are closely interwoven with her hair. She takes great delight in her locks and willingly makes the needed effort to care for them properly. It is almost always the first thing people notice about her, and is the personal attribute she most readily identifies with herself.

And so Christmas Day now approaches. Neither has the money to buy the other a gift truly worthy of their love. Yet each has clearly in mind what they want to give the other. And so the man decides to sell his beloved watch, in an act of self-giving love, so that he can give his wife a fitting present. With his money he buys her an exquisite pearl comb to adorn her hair.

She, too, agonizes over what to do. The greatest pleasure she could have would be to see him happy. She tries every way she can think of to raise the needed money, but to no avail. One thing remains for the woman. She goes to a place that buys hair for wigs, and there she sells her flowing black tresses. With the money she buys her husband a gold chain for his watch, because she knows that will please him greatly.

It is a simple story of two lovers who give themselves to each other, and they do it in the form of unexpected gifts—gifts truly from the heart.

This Christmas you will, no doubt, receive many presents. Now they may look like sweaters and shirts and ties, blouses and scarves and hats and toys. But don't let appearances deceive you. What is really given are pearl combs and gold watch chains, or their equivalents today.

When a person gives a true gift—in, through, and with the present—comes himself or herself. With the gift comes the giver. For you see, giving is one way we attempt to break into the world of another and to tell him or her of our caring and love. Through our actions we say, "Take these elegant gloves and know that I care more for you than life itself" or "I bought you a most beautiful bracelet that you might see the depth of my affection."

Presents are, in a way, clever disguises. They camouflage the deep, and sometimes embarrassed, feelings of love and generosity we may feel toward others. Presents are respectable symbols of the depths inside us, levels that are hard to express in words.

Christmas in its finest sense is about giving. O. Henry's story reminds us that we truly and fully give, only when we give of ourselves. In this kind of caring our own desires and possessions become secondary to those of another.

And so it is also with the greatest Christmas story of all. That narrative tells how God gave from himself that a child should be born. He was named Jesus, and he grew to fulfill the prophecies of one who would come as God's anointed, God's Holy One, to do for us what we could not, and cannot do, for ourselves. He has brought us salvation and meaning. He has given us full life, not merely the shadow of existence. He has given us a future and not just a past.

An unexpected gift. Undeserved to be sure, but so good to receive. When sometimes we can't even like ourselves, how astounding it is to discover that God cares for you and cares for me. Our blemishes and our failings don't disqualify us. They don't push us away.

With this unexpected, this best gift of all, comes the giver. Once and for all, now and forever.

Tonight we are reminded, "For unto us is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord." And when he is born anew in your hearts each Christmas, you'll find that you can never be the same again.