

THE RECEIVING IN GIVING

Scriptures: Philippians 4:10-20; Acts 20:32-35

There is a classic short story by O. Henry called “The Gift of the Magi.” The main characters are a young couple named Jim and Della, who live on \$20 a week in a tiny second floor apartment. Della wants to buy Jim a Christmas present, but all she has managed to save is \$1.87. So on Christmas Eve she goes to a wig maker and sells her long golden brown hair for \$20. She then uses the money to buy a platinum watch chain for Jim’s prize pocket watch that he inherited from his grandfather.

When Jim comes home and sees Della’s hair, he is speechless. Della runs to him crying, “Jim, darling! Don’t look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn’t live through Christmas without giving you a present. ... You don’t know what a nice gift I’ve got for you.”

Jim is slow to react. “You cut off your hair?” he asks quizzically, as if he still hasn’t figured it out. “Cut it off and sold it,” Della says. “Don’t you like me just as well anyhow? I’m me without my hair, ain’t I?”

Jim recovers and takes Della in his arms. “Don’t make any mistake, Dell. I don’t think there’s anything in the way of a haircut or shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you’ll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first.”

Della unwraps the present, and there lies a beautiful set of jeweled-rimmed combs to put in what was once her long flowing brown hair. This time it is Della’s turn to be speechless. But she recovers and runs to get Jim’s present. When Jim opens it he smiles. “Dell,” he says, “let’s put our Christmas presents away and keep ‘em awhile. They’re too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs.”

I want to come back to this story in a minute. First, though, I would like you to turn again in the pew Bible to our scripture reading for today: Philippians 4, beginning at verse 10 (NT, p. 199). In the pew Bibles this section is entitled, “Acknowledgement of the Philippians’ Gift.” It is not readily apparent from the first verse, but Paul has just received a significant mission gift from the Philippians to support him while he is in prison. In the ancient world prisoners were often provided food and clothes by their family members, not by the prison. If they had no family, they could be in dire straights. Epaphroditus has just arrived from Philippi with a mission offering, which could be used among other things to buy food and clothes for Paul while he was in prison.

Paul responds to this in verse 10, “I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.” Paul is a little vague here, but basically he is thanking them for their gift ... sort of. I say sort of, because in the next three verses he tells them that he did not need it. Verses 11-13:

Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul writes one cryptic sentence thanking them for their gift, then three sentences telling them that he did not need it. Isn't that an odd way to show appreciation? Then in verse 14 he says, "In any case, it was kind of you to share in my distress." Now that sounds like he really did need it. So why does he make such a point of saying that he didn't?

The key to this scripture is to realize that the gift of money was not what really mattered to Paul. He was grateful for it, but it was not what really mattered. What mattered was the relationship it represented. Look at verses 15-19. Paul says,

You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs more than once.

Paul reminds the Philippians of their long-standing partnership in sharing the gospel. He actually started the letter with the same emphasis. Turn back to chapter 1 and look at verses 3-5. At the beginning of the letter Paul says,

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with you in every one of my prayers for all of you because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

It isn't just the gift that Paul values, it is the relationship: their partnership in the gospel.

And that, of course, is the key to the story of Jim and Della. It is not the gifts that matter, it is the relationship—the sacrifice that each is willing to make for the other. O. Henry concludes the story with this comment:

Here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. ... They are the Magi.

The real point of giving is not the money; it is the relationship, not only the Philippians' relationship to Paul but also their relationship to God. Remember what Paul said in verse 17. He said, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account." In Greek this verse says literally, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit increasing in you." In Paul's letters the word "fruit" does not mean bananas. It means the fruit of righteousness, the fruit of holiness, the "fruits of the Spirit." In other words, what counts is not the money but the relationship to God that is built by your sharing.

And that brings me to the issue of giving in church. To be faithful to this scripture passage I should probably say, “Hey, we don’t need your offerings today. If enough comes in to pay the pastors or the other church staff, that’s fine; if not, it’s no big deal. We’re content.” I can hear some of the church staff sucking in their breath. That is what I should say if I were really like the apostle Paul. But I am not that stoic. I do care about whether we get paid, and I am very grateful that you give to help make that happen. But here is the deeper truth. Giving to the church is not about paying the bills or paying the staff. It is about relationships: your relationship to God and your partnership in sharing God with others.

In verse 18 Paul describes the Philippians’ gift as “a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.” If you think about it, an Old Testament sacrifice does not meet any need. It just gets burned up. It is like buying a watch chain for someone who no longer has a watch, or hair combs for someone who no longer has hair. It is a foolish gift, until you realize that the gift is not about meeting a need; it is about cementing a relationship. Jim and Della did not really value the watch chain or the hair combs, they valued each other. The gifts were an expression of their relationship, and that is how Paul felt toward the offering given to him by the Philippians. And that is how God feels about your offerings.

In his book *Craddock Stories* Fred Craddock tells this story about his sister Frieda.

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My sister Frieda died six years ago of cancer. She knew she was dying. About a week before she died, she had her husband label every item in the house that had been given to her over the last number of years, sometimes as much as twenty-five or thirty years ago. She had a wallhanging or a piece of glassware, or a vase or something, given by her friends, and she told him who gave her every item, and the occasion for it—birthday, anniversary, so forth.

Then he called these friends to come and get their presents to her. I was there that weekend when people came driving up to receive the presents that they had given to Frieda, my sister, years ago. I was embarrassed about this, . . . and when I got to the house, a woman was coming out. She had driven from Huntsville, Alabama, and she had a vase that she had given my sister twenty-five years before. I said, “I want you to please forgive my sister. We were taught as kids you don’t return gifts that people give you; you keep them and you prize them. But she is very ill, and I hope you’ll understand that’s the reason for it.”

And the woman said, “I have never had a gift like this in my life—to have a gift that is twice blessed. For twenty-five years it reminded Frieda of me. Now it goes into my home and will remind me of her” (pp. 127-128).

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That’s how it is with every gift you give to God. It is twice blessed. It will remind God of you, and it will remind you of God.

- Ken Onstot
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