

The neighborhood where I grew up in Arlington, Virginia just across the Potomac from Washington, D.C. consisted of several blocks of townhouses. We called them “garden apartments,” however, since each block consisted of three rows of townhouses that formed three sides of a square. They were “garden apartments” to us because each residence had a small backyard, and all of the backyards faced a large open area, a commons, where we kids used to play together — something we spent a lot of time doing since there were no smart phones or other devices to distract us, unless you count T.V. and the — count ‘em — three channels that were available back then.

With the exception of the winter months, everyone, adults and kids alike, spent a lot of time sitting outside in their yard, visiting neighbors in theirs, or playing. I grew up in the days when air conditioning was neither widely available nor affordable, and few of us wanted to spend summer evenings sitting indoors sweltering through Washington’s often brutal heat and humidity, something that was so oppressive that in those days the British Embassy staff used to get extra pay for serving in the tropics.

In short, we spent a lot of time with our neighbors, and we had the same neighbors for years on end. For as transient as the Washington area was then (and is now), our neighborhood was something of a constant. So we got to know our neighbors pretty well, and they us, and we all had to learn to get along together, come what may.

One of our neighbors was an elderly widow, Mrs. Wendorf. All of us had our quirks, no doubt, and one of Mrs. Wendorf’s was crossword puzzles. She loved crossword puzzles. I don’t mean she liked them. I mean she organized her day around them. There were two newspapers in D.C. back then, *The Washington Post* published each morning, as it still is, and *The Evening Star* published each afternoon, though it ceased publication more than forty years ago.

Mrs. Wendorf made sure that whatever else she had to do on Tuesdays and Thursdays would long since be over before *The Star* landed on her doorstep come mid-afternoon. All other activity had to cease so she could tackle the crossword puzzle *The Star* published on

those two days. *The Star* invited subscribers to complete it and send it back to the newspaper. Those who filled it out correctly would then be entered in a drawing to receive a small prize, \$25 as I remember, which, now that I think about it, wasn't such small a sum back in those days. Mrs. Wendorf was always sure she was going to win, and without fail, every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon when I got home from school, or promptly at 4:00 if it was summertime, I was to go to Mrs. Wendorf's house, pick up her puzzle and take it to the mailbox a few blocks away. (Back then they picked up and delivered mail twice a day, if you can imagine that.)

For my trouble, Mrs. Wendorf would give me a dime. She promised that when she won — note, “*when*” she won, not “*if*” she won — she'd give me five dollars, which would've been a considerable windfall for me in those days. As it turned out, she never won, but neither did she ever give up hope or lose her confidence, and thinking back on it, her example in that regard was the most valuable thing she could have given me. I try to get back home to the old neighborhood several times a year, and when I do I always walk down to where the mailbox used to be both to remember Mrs. Wendorf and to offer a little thanks for what she was teaching me back then when I thought I was just getting her sure-to-be prizewinner in the mail.

At Christmas, Mrs. Wendorf would always give me a little present, and one year she gave me an anthology of O. Henry's short stories. Some of you may be familiar with O'Henry, an American author of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Being an avid reader even then, I poured through it. One of the stories was, "The Gift of the Magi."¹ Perhaps some of you have read it. It opens with O. Henry's poignant depiction of a young wife, Della, who's growing increasingly anxious on Christmas Eve. She and her husband, Jim, are rather down on their luck and in precarious financial circumstances. Della wants desperately to give Jim a gift that conveys the full depth of her love for him. The problem is this: she only has \$1.87 to spend. She wanders through the streets of the shopping district looking into store windows, hoping against hope that somehow she'll find something she'll be able to give Jim. Finally, she

¹ O. Henry, "The Gift of the Magi," http://www.auburn.edu/~vestmon/Gift_of_the_Magi.html.

sees it: a platinum chain fob, the perfect gift because it complements the only thing of any worth that Jim possesses, the gold watch that'd been given to Jim by his father, and to his father by Jim's grandfather. It cost \$20, however. Della was crushed. But then she thought of a way she could pay for it. She'd cut off and sell her beautiful, knee-length flowing hair, the only thing of any worth she possessed, to raise the funds.

She bought the watch chain, hurried home and could not wait for Jim to return. Her excitement mounted as he climbed the stairs to their apartment on that Christmas Eve. Jim opened the door, a present tucked under his arm for her. With tears in her eyes and love in her heart, she gave Jim his present. And Jim gave his to Della: a beautiful set of tortoise-shell combs that he'd sold his watch to buy. They'd both given up what they most cherished. "Of all who give and receive gifts," O. Henry writes, "such as they are wisest. They are the magi."²

In just a few days, we'll celebrate God's gift to us of His Son, the fulfillment of the signs of God's love that were foretold both by the prophet Isaiah to Ahaz, as we heard in our First Reading, that "the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel,"³ and by "the angel of the Lord" to Joseph, that "it is through the holy Spirit that [Mary's child] has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins,"⁴ as we heard in the Gospel.

These extraordinary events weren't simply signs to Ahaz or to Joseph, they're signs to us, too. Through them, God's love and mercy were — and are still — manifested, made real. They're among His many signs to us. But there's more to the story. Because God's signs to us raise a question: what signs will we give Him? How will we manifest, how will we make real, our love for Him? The key word here is "manifest". I'm sure Jim and Della often verbalized their love for each other, but saying it and demonstrating it are two different things. The Lord's signs to Ahaz and Joseph were signs not because they were promised but because they were fulfilled; in fact, they were signs *only* because they became a reality.

² Ibid.

³ Isa 7:14 (NAB)

⁴ Mt 1:20-21 (NAB)

In two weeks, we'll celebrate Epiphany, among other things a commemoration of the Three Magi and the gifts they offer to the infant Messiah. Sometimes the signs we bring to the Lord are the various gifts we carry with us. And sometimes the signs aren't what we bring; sometimes our signs are the things we leave behind, sometimes our gifts are what we give up, as was the case with Della and Jim.

Paul alludes to this in our Second Reading, a passage that's easy for us as people living in a very different time and culture to gloss over and miss the powerful impact it had on his contemporaries. Today's Second Reading is from the opening of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, something he wrote toward the end of his life. In his day, the opening of a letter or written work was deemed to be of particular significance, and Paul's letter is no exception. In only the fifth verse, he reminds the church that he was called to extend the Lord's grace and peace "for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles ... [who are] also ... called to belong to Jesus Christ."⁵

That would have stopped his listeners in their tracks (Paul's epistles were read publicly, not privately, in the first century) because in the early Church, no question was more bitterly divisive and no antagonism more intense than the question of whether or not Gentiles, that is non-Jews, must first become Jewish if they wished to be followers of Jesus. Even the Apostles were themselves initially quite divided on this score, something that led, Paul tells us, to a fierce argument between he and Peter wherein Paul "opposed him to his face because he was clearly wrong."⁶

Before the early Church could be a sign of God's presence in the world, it would first have to offer a sign to God, and that sign would have to be that it had given up its prejudice against non-Jews, people whom proper Jews considered ritually unclean and simply beyond the moral pale.

It took our earliest forebears in the faith decades to learn a lesson proclaimed on the occasion we'll celebrate in just a few days when the signs foretold by the prophet Isaiah and

⁵ Rom 1:5-7 (NAB)

⁶ Gal 2:11 (NAB)

the Holy Spirit first came to fulfillment, a fulfillment heralded by “an angel of the Lord” to a group of shepherds huddled against the Judean cold on a hillside outside of Bethlehem, shepherds who were themselves as a class also considered outcasts in the ancient world even by other non-Jews. “Do not be afraid,” the angel told them, “for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born to you who is Messiah and Lord.”⁷ Actually, the angel brought two messages that night: the message of the Good News, and the message revealed in to whom the message was first delivered.

The Christ, the Messiah and Lord, has come “for all” — note — “for *all* the people”. Even shepherds. “All” means “all”.

Two millennia have passed since then, but the sinful urge to demean others, to sow among “all the people” racial, ethnic, national, religious, social, linguistic, and an unholy litany of many other divisions still plagues the human heart and soul. Surely giving up our embrace of these divisions, and better still not accepting them in the first place from the hands of those who monetize them for their own profit or wield them as a pathway to their own power, is among the gifts, the signs, that the Risen Lord expects from us. “For,” as Paul reminded the church in Rome — and reminds us — “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him,” and reminding his Roman brothers and sisters as well that he and all who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ are “under obligation” to extend Christ’s love “to Greeks and non-Greeks alike, to the wise and the ignorant,”⁸ for without being bearers of Christ’s love, we become little more than a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal,” as Paul warned on another occasion.⁹

In just a few short days, we’ll be invited once again to follow the star of hope whose Light will never dim across the night sky of whatever fears or animosities, grievances or divisions, have darkened our life, following it to the most unlikely places and the most

⁷ Lk 2:10-11 (NAB)

⁸ Rom 1:14 (NAB)

⁹ 1 Cor 13:1 (NRSV)

unexpected circumstances. There, we'll find the Prince of Peace gazing at us and asking what we've brought to honor Him. We'll lay our gifts at His feet, as is only appropriate. But it's those things we no longer possess, those things we've given up to follow the star, of which He's likely to be the most appreciative.