

Stories from Sunday, December 10, 2017

An Exchange of Gifts

Adapted from a story told by Diane Rayner

I grew up believing that Christmas was a time when strange and wonderful things happen. This all played out in a very special way the Christmas my youngest son Marty was eight years old. That spring we had moved to a cozy trailer home just outside Redmond, Washington. I was a single mom working as a meat wrapper, but I managed to provide the children with small allowances for helping out at home. So as the holidays approached, even the winter rains that doused our roof and kept our floors muddy could not dampen our spirits.

Marty, who was cheerful, blond-haired, and playful, was especially exuberant and busy throughout that December. I noticed how eagerly he made his bed, took out the trash, set the table with extra care, and cooperated with his older siblings to make sure he earned his allowance. I also noticed how seriously he added to his savings from that tiny allowance. I suspected that somehow this had something to do with Kenny.

Kenny was the friend that Marty had found that spring, and they were seldom apart. They both loved the out-of-doors and there was a whole world to be explored in the meadow between our two trailers. There was a horse pasture, and a stream teeming with frogs, snakes, arrowheads, and other treasures. So when you called one of these boys, you got both of them. But as hard as times were for us, Kenny's family had it much worse. They were desperately poor and his mom was very proud about making do without charity.

We worked that year, as every year, to make our home festive for the Christmas holiday. Hand-crafted ornaments were strung about the place and home-made gifts were hidden away. Kenny would join us for some of the crafts. Marty and Kenny would sit still long enough to add some flourishes to the décor. But then, in a flash, one would whisper to the other and they would be out the door and sliding cautiously under the electric fence, into the horse pasture, which separated our home from Kenny's.

One night shortly before Christmas, while I was elbow deep in cookie dough, Marty came to me beaming happily. He cocked his head up at me like a puppy, as he usually did when he expected to have a conversation. This was because he was deaf in his left ear. He announced that he had bought Kenny a Christmas present, something that he knew Kenny had really wanted for a *long* time! He cocked his head expectantly for my reply while pulling a small box from his pocket. I asked if I could see what he had been saving all those allowances to purchase. It was a compass, the perfect gift to point an eight-year-old adventurer through the woods.

"It's a lovely gift, Marty!" I exclaimed, but even as I spoke, a disturbing thought came to mind. I knew how Kenny's mother felt about their poverty. I was pretty sure they could barely afford to exchange gifts among themselves, so giving presents to others was out of the question. I was sure that Kenny's proud mother would not permit her son to receive something that he could not return in kind. Gently I talked the problem over with Marty. He listened carefully, head cocked up to the right, and he understood. But his next thought was, "But what if it was a secret? What if they never found out who gave it?"

I didn't know how to answer him.

The day before Christmas was rainy, cold and gray. It continued to rain as night settled in. I felt an odd sadness this Christmas Eve. We wouldn't even be able to see the star-light through the clouds, so how

could anything miraculous and wonderful happen in this soggy mess? No wise men, shepherds or angels would want to be out in this weather. As I was having these thoughts while looking out the kitchen window, I saw Marty slip out the door, wearing his coat over his pajamas and clutching a small, colorfully wrapped box in his hand.

Off he went, down through the soggy pasture and under the electric fence. I could barely see him as he tip-toed up the steps to Kenny's trailer. It looked like he opened the screen door just a crack and placed the gift on the doorstep. Then he reached up to press the doorbell, turned quickly, and began a wild race to get away unnoticed. Suddenly he ran smack dab into the electric fence. Wearing wet, slick shoes, the jolt from the fence sent him reeling. He lay there on the soggy ground, stunned, body quivering and gasping for breath. But before we could decide what to do to help him, Marty was back on his feet and pushing slowly through the rain to the house. He was dazed and confused and about ready to cry as he stated, "I was in such a hurry that I forgot about that fence and it knocked me down!"

There was a red mark beginning to blister across his face, so we found the burn ointment and then made hot cocoa. All this seemed to soothe Marty's spirits and as I tucked him into bed he announced, "Mom, I'm sure Kenny didn't see me." And he smiled.

I was not so happy. It seemed to me that it was a cruel thing to happen on Christmas Eve to a little boy who had lovingly gone on a true Christmas mission of leaving a gift and expecting nothing in return. I was feeling let down again. It seemed that Christmas Eve had come and gone as an ordinary, problem-filled date with no magic or enchantment.

Christmas morning dawned brightly. The rain had stopped and Marty's burn was not serious. We had all that, each other, and our gifts to be thankful for. When Kenny showed up from next door to show Marty his surprise compass which had arrived so mysteriously, it was plain that Kenny did not suspect Marty at all. Then I noticed while the two boys were chattering away, comparing their Christmases, that Marty was not cocking his head to the side. He seemed to be listening with his left ear. Sure enough, a report came from the school nurse verifying that Marty had complete hearing in both ears!

The mystery of how Marty regained his hearing (and still has it) remains just that – a mystery. Doctors suspect, of course, that the shock from the electric fence was somehow responsible. Whatever the cause, I will be continually and forever thankful to God for the true exchange of gifts that happened that night, including my gift of understanding that miraculous things do still happen on the night of our Lord's birth and one does not have to have a clear night, either, to follow a fabulous star!

Back Spacer

"I once had such an epic fight with one of my best friends that we didn't speak for years. Then we found each other again, and all has been well in the decade since. But the stupidity of that rift always pained me, and I guess it bothered him, too: For Christmas a few years after we made up, he gave me a silver box containing an old typewriter's backspace key— he'd pried it off his vintage Underwood—and a note that said, 'If only it worked on everything.'"

—Katie Arnold-Ratliff, "O" articles editor

Wooden Box

Christmas is for love. It is for joy, for giving and sharing, for laughter, for reuniting with family and friends, for tinsel and brightly covered packages. But, mostly Christmas is for love. I had not believed this until a small elfin like pupil with wide innocent eyes and soft rosy cheeks gave me a wondrous gift one Christmas.

Matthew was a 10-year-old orphan who lived with his aunt—a bitter, middle-aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for her dead sister's son. She never failed to remind young Matthew, that if it hadn't been for her generosity, he would be a vagrant, homeless waif. Still, with all the scolding and chilliness at home, he was a sweet and gentle child.

I had not noticed Matthew particularly until he began staying after class each day (at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger, so I learned later) to help me straighten up the room. We did this quietly and comfortably, not speaking much, but enjoying the solitude of that hour of the day. When we did talk, Matthew spoke mostly of his mother. Though he was quite young when she died, he remembered a kind, gentle, loving woman who always spent time with him.

As Christmas drew near, however, Matthew failed to stay after school each day. I looked forward to his coming, and when the days passed and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, I stopped him one afternoon and asked him why he no longer helped me in the room. I told him how I had missed him, and his large brown eyes lit up eagerly as he replied, "Did you really miss me?" I explained how he had been my best helper. "I was making you a surprise," he whispered confidentially. "It's for Christmas." With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room. He didn't stay after school any more after that.

Finally came the last school day before Christmas. Matthew crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back. "I have your present," he said timidly when I looked up. "I hope you like it." He held out his hands, and there lying in his small palms was a tiny wooden box.

"It's beautiful, Matthew. Is there something in it?" I asked, opening the top to look inside. "Oh, you can't see what's in it," he replied, "and you can't touch it, or taste it or feel it, but mother always said it makes you feel good all the time—warm on cold nights and safe when you're all alone."

I gazed into the empty box. "What is it, Matthew?" I asked gently, "that will make me feel so good?"

"It's love," he whispered softly, "and mother always said it's best when you give it away." He turned and quietly left the room.

So now I keep a small box crudely made of scraps of wood on the piano in my living room and only smile when inquiring friends raise quizzical eyebrows when I explain to them there is love in it.

Yes, Christmas is for gaiety, mirth, song, and for good and wondrous gifts. But mostly, Christmas is for love.