

**A Gift from the Heart**

**Don Lincoln**

My predecessor, Bob Young, Pastor Emeritus, began a practice in the beginning of his ministry of reading a story on Christmas Eve. Not long ago the family gathered them up and bound them into a book for him. I have a copy of that, thankfully. I thought I'd take a look at some of those and I'm reading today a true story that was written by a very famous, well known preacher - the famed Pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City for more than 50 years, Norman Vincent Peale.

Dr. Young read this Christmas Eve in 1967 which would have been his second Christmas Eve at Westminster. Somehow it seems fitting to bracket the more than half a century of combined ministry Bob Young and I have shared in this congregation – with this true story he read all those years ago

So listen:

New York City, where I live, is impressive at any time, but as Christmas approaches, it's overwhelming. Store windows blaze with light and color, furs and jewels. Golden angels, 40 feet tall, hover over Fifth Avenue. Wealth, power, opulence – nothing in the world can match this fabulous display.

Through the gleaming canyons, people hurry to find last-minute gifts. Money rarely seems to be a problem. If there's a problem, it's that the recipients so often have everything they need or want it's hard to find anything that will really say, "I love you."

Last December, as Christ's birthday drew near, a stranger was faced with just that problem. She had come from Switzerland to live in an American home to perfect her English. In return, she would act as home secretary, mind the grandchildren, do other tasks as needed. She was a girl in her late teens. Her name was Ursula.

One of the tasks her employers gave her was keeping track of Christmas presents as they arrived in the home. There were many, and all would require acknowledgment. Ursula kept a faithful record – but with a growing concern of how many there were, and how many people would need to be thanked. She was grateful to her American family; she wanted to show her gratitude to them by giving them a Christmas present herself.

But nothing she could buy with her small allowance could compare with the gifts she was recording daily in that household. Besides, even without these gifts, it appeared her employers already had everything.

At night, from her window, Ursula could see the snowy expanse of Central Park, and beyond it the jagged skyline of the city. Far below, in the restless streets, taxis hooted and traffic lights winked red and green. Looking out the window in the solitude of her little room, a few days before Christmas, a secret idea came to Ursula.

It was almost as if a voice spoke clearly, inside her head. It's true," said the voice, "that many people in this city have much more than you do. But surely there are many who have far less. If you will think about this, you may find a solution to what's troubling you."

Ursula thought long and hard. Finally on her day off, which was Christmas Eve, she went to a department store. She moved slowly along the crowded aisles, selecting and rejecting things in her mind. At last she found something, bought it and had it wrapped in gaily colored paper. She went out into the gray twilight and wondered helplessly, "What now?" Finally, she went up to a doorman – splendid in gold and blue. "Excuse me, please!" she said in her hesitant English, "Can you tell me where to find a poor street?"

"A poor street, miss?" said the puzzled man.

"Yes, a very poor street. The poorest in the city."

The doorman looked doubtful. "Well, you might try down in the Village. Or the Lower East Side. Or up in Harlem, maybe."

But these names meant nothing to Ursula. She thanked the doorman and walked along, threading her way through the stream of shoppers until she came to a policeman. "Please," she said, "Can you direct me to a very poor street in Harlem?"

The policeman looked at her and shook his head. "Harlem's no place for you, miss." And he blew his whistle and turned back to the traffic.

Holding her package carefully, Ursula walked on, head bowed against the sharp wind. If a street looked poorer than the one she was on, she took it. But none seemed like the poor conditions she had heard about. Once she stopped a woman, "Please, where do the very poor people live?" But the woman gave her a stare and hurried on.

Darkness filled the sky. Ursula was cold and discouraged and afraid of getting lost. She came to an intersection and stood alone on the corner. What she was trying to do suddenly seemed foolish, impulsive, absurd. Then, through the traffic's roar, she heard the cheerful tinkle of a bell. On the corner opposite, a man from the Salvation Army was making his traditional Christmas appeal.

At once Ursula brightened. The Salvation Army was in Switzerland, too. Surely this man could tell her what she wanted to know. She crossed over to him. "Can

you help me? I'm looking for a baby. I have here a little present for the poorest baby I can find." And she held up the package with the green ribbon and the gaily colored paper.

Dressed in worn gloves and an overcoat a size too big, he seemed a very ordinary man. But behind his steel-rimmed glasses his eyes were kind. He looked at Ursula and stopped ringing his bell. "What sort of present?" he asked.

"A little dress. For a small, poor baby girl. Do you know of one?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Of more than one, I'm afraid."

"Would it be far away? I could take a taxi maybe?"

The Salvation Army man wrinkled his forehead. Finally he said, "It's almost six o'clock. My relief will show up then. If you want to wait, and you can afford a dollar taxi ride, I'll take you to a family in my own neighborhood who needs just about everything."

"And they have a small baby?"

"Yes, a very small baby girl."

"Then," said Ursula joyfully, "I'll wait!"

The substitute bell-ringer came. A cruising taxi stopped and they got in. In its welcome warmth, she told her new friend about herself, how she came to be in New York, what she was trying to do. He listened in silence, and the taxi driver listened too. When they reached their destination, the driver said, "Take your time, miss. I'll wait for you."

On the sidewalk, Ursula stared up at the tenement – dark, decaying, wrapped in hopelessness. A gust of wind, iron-cold, stirred the refuse in the street and rattled the trash cans. "They live on the third floor," the Salvation Army man said. "Shall we go up?"

But Ursula shook her head. "They would try to thank me, and this is not from me."

She pressed the package into his hand. "Take it up for me, please. Say it's from ... from someone who has everything."

Back inside, the taxi bore her swiftly from the dark streets to lighted ones, from misery to abundance. She visualized the Salvation Army man climbing the stairs, the knock, the explanation, the package being opened, the dress on the baby.

Arriving at the apartment on Fifth Avenue where she lived, she fumbled in her purse. But the driver flicked the flag up. "No charge, miss."

"No charge?" echoed Ursula, bewildered.

"Don't worry!" the driver said. "I've been paid." He smiled and drove away.

Ursula was up early the next day. She set the table with special care. By the time she was finished, the family was awake, and there was all the excitement and laughter of Christmas morning. Soon the living room was a sea of discarded wrappings.

Ursula thanked everyone for the presents she received. Finally, when there was a lull, she began to explain hesitantly why there wasn't one from her. She told about going to the department store. She told about the Salvation Army man. She told about the taxi driver. When she finished, there was a long silence. No one seemed able to speak.

"So you see," said Ursula, "I tried to do kindness in your name. And this is my Christmas present to you."

"How do I know all this?" writes the author of the story? I know it because ours was the home where Ursula lived. Ours was the Christmas filled with all those presents that she shared. We were like many Americans in our day, so richly blessed that to this child there seemed to be nothing she could add to all the material things we already had. And so she offered something of far greater value: a gift from her heart, an act of kindness carried out in our name.

Strange, isn't it? A shy Swiss girl, alone in a great impersonal city. You would think that nothing she could do would affect anyone. And yet, by trying to give away love, she brought the true spirit of Christmas into our lives and the lives of a number of others, the spirit of selfless giving.

The story was written a long time ago and there are a few pieces of it I would have changed to say things perhaps a little differently and my guess is the cab fare would have been a whole lot more than a buck. But the truth of the story – selfless giving – is truly what Christmas is about because it comes from the most selfless gift of all. From a God who has everything, who needs nothing, and yet gives His very self to us – an impoverished people who may have all the stuff in the world, but all that stuff doesn't fill us with the joy that we really yearn for.

A great story Bob Young began his ministry with a long time ago. And what a great story for us to share again in this Christmas tide.

Amen.

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