

# **What's Their Wish?**

Luke 2:1-20

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I introduced this year's Advent theme by proclaiming that God is giving gifts and invites us to wish for something.

As I pondered this annual Christmas Eve homily, I came across a reflection on gift-giving written by the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf. Here is what he said:

If you are like me, you dread one essential part of Christmas celebrations: gift-giving. My problems start with shopping. To give, you have to shop, but for me shopping is disturbingly disorienting, especially at Christmas. With all the glitzy stuff staring at me from everywhere I can't figure out what I like (let alone what I like and can also afford). But the ordeal of shopping itself is nothing compared to the challenge of finding the right kind of gift. Too expensive a gift is—well, too expensive. Too cheap a gift is insulting. The list of difficulties goes on. Christmas gift-giving becomes almost painful.

We all can imagine Christmas gift-giving at its best, however. Shopping is over, decent gifts are wrapped and waiting under the Christmas tree, and the long-awaited ritual begins. Each person gives and each receives. . . . Each person is grateful, each person is generous, and all are rejoicing. The gifts themselves are not simply things that people like, need or desire; they are sacraments of a relationship. By giving things, givers have given their own selves.

This kind of gift-giving turns the whole ritual into a feast of delight—delight in things given, delight in acts of giving and receiving, delight in persons giving and receiving, delight in community constituted by mutual gift-giving. When we have engaged in such gift-giving, we have tasted the advent of God's new world in which love reigns. What better expression of the spirit of Christmas could there be than an enactment of a community of joyful givers and grateful receivers?

And yet there is something wrong with this account of Christmas gift-giving.

I must admit, first reading this essay I was drawn into the warmth of Volf's ideal gift-giving and was startled when he said that was something wrong with it. What could be wrong with this wonderful image? He continues:

Though such a community is an earthly good beyond all others because it is a community of love, in a world of uneven distribution of wealth it is positively sinful for

such communities to remain turned only toward themselves. The gifts may not just circle through the community to the delight of its members; they must also reach outsiders in need.

Yes, that is the flaw in the image. Generosity turned only to those we are closest to is no generosity at all. Volf reminds us that the Magi “did not huddle together around a warm fire and give gifts to each other and delight in each other’s generosity.”

Volf continues:

Christmas celebration is about . . . reciprocal giving in a circle of intimates, an enactment of a provisional advent of God’s future world of love. [But] It is also about . . . giving to those outside the circle . . . .

This kind of giving, Volf writes, is “a small contribution to aligning the world of sin and need with God’s coming world of love.”

The reason the ideal image of mutual gift-giving is mistaken is that it makes Christmas itself the goal, which it isn’t. After four weeks of Advent preparation and three months of decorated department stores, we might be forgiven if we think that Christmas was the end goal in sight. It is not. Volf writes,

For Christmas is not the goal, [it is not] the realization of the world of perfect love. Christmas is the *movement* toward that goal, the endeavor of God to draw all people into the world of love.

God has given us the greatest of gifts – the Christ is born in us, the fiery Spirit of God is burning within us, our wishes may even now be coming true. But these are not the goal, they are only the movement toward the goal. And that goal is a world of love that includes all people.

Spend these days with your loved ones, your family and friends. And somewhere in the midst of your enjoyment, remember all those who this year are not yet included in that world of love. Give a thought to them. What is their wish this Christmas?