

## **Gift of the Magi**

A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
Edmonton, Alberta  
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by Carol Penner  
Texts: Matthew 2:1-15; John 3:16; I John 3:16, 18

Christmas is a season of giving. Gift giving and generosity has been a part of celebrating Christmas for over a thousand years. Jesus was the first and best Christmas gift. A gift announced by angels...a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. A gift for all time, a gift that would change us forever. Jesus came to tell us that God is always giving love to us. God is for giving, and forgiving, always.

In response to the gift of Jesus, the new king, the wise men came from the east following a star. They brought gifts, expensive gifts to give as they paid homage to this newborn baby. That's the story we heard in our scripture today. We don't know how many wise men came from the east, but we do know the gifts they brought; gold, frankincense and myrrh. Tradition has taught that there were three wise men, one for each of the gifts, and names were even given to the wise men. The wise men gave sacrificially...they undertook a trip from a long distance, to a country they probably barely knew, to give expensive gifts to a baby they'd never met. They did that following the call of God...they trusted what God was telling them in the form of a star.

And so following the example of God and the wise men, we celebrate Christmas with gift giving. But for Christians gift giving isn't something we just do at Christmas. Christians, in response to the gift of Jesus, give ourselves to God. It's not enough to buy gifts, or to write cheques for God. It's our whole selves we give to God. That's what baptism is about. We become members of the kingdom of God where every season is a giving season. We decide to model our lives on Jesus, who gave his life for us. That's our community's genetic makeup, and we try to cultivate and nurture this giving season every day of the year. We call that wisdom.

What I want to do today is tell a story of one woman with exactly this giving character. She is a magi, a wise woman, whose story is a gift to us in this New Year.

Irena Sendler was born in 1910 in Poland. She grew up in a devout Christian home where she was taught about giving; her parents were Catholic, and her father was a doctor. When Irena was a small girl, there was a typhus epidemic in one of the poor neighbourhoods her father served, and no doctors would go into that neighbourhood. There was no cure for typhus and it was terribly contagious. But Irena's father went and served the sick people, doing what he could. He came down with typhus, and he died of it. Irena was seven years old. She always remembered something her father told her, "If you see someone drowning, you must jump in the water and try to save them, even if you don't know how to swim."

For Irina's father it had to do with character...you will not leave someone to die alone, you will give them help, as much help as you can. There was no cure for typhus, yet Irena's father still went to that neighbourhood to comfort and help those who were sick, he would do what he could. It was a sacrificial gift and it cost him his life.

Irena grew up and eventually enrolled at Warsaw University. She attended in the 1930's, which was a time when discrimination against Jewish people was starting. In fact while she was a student, the university made a rule that Jews were not allowed to sit on the same benches as other students. They were segregated to a certain side of the room, on certain benches marked for them. One day Irena went and sat with the Jews. The professor knew her and that she wasn't Jewish and told her to go back to the Aryan side of the class. In front of everyone Irina responded, "I am Jewish today." She was just a small woman, only 4'11" tall, but she took a very big principled stand that day. She was suspended from the university for a year for that action. She eventually was able to get training, and became a nurse.

Irena was in her late twenties when the Second World War broke out. It was a terrible time to be a Jew in Poland, and in 1940 all the Jews in Warsaw were herded into a small twelve block area...there were 400,000 Jews in this neighbourhood or ghetto. The ghetto was sealed with high walls, and the Jews were not allowed to come out. The conditions within the ghetto were horrible. There was not enough food and many people got sick. Irena was part of the Polish underground in Warsaw.

As a nurse, Irena was able to get a job as a social worker in the ghetto, inspecting it for sanitary conditions. The people in Warsaw were very worried that the disease in the ghetto would spread outside. As she went into the ghetto to do her inspections, she smuggled in food and medicine.

And then in 1942 half of the Warsaw ghetto, 200,000 people, were transported out. They were told they were being re-located, but the trains went straight to Treblinka, an extermination camp an hour away. This mass transport and murder spurred the Polish underground to increase their efforts to try to save people. Irena started organizing to help children escape. She worked with a team of 25 people, 24 women and 1 man. They decided to help the children because they were small, and could be smuggled out more easily than adults. Officially Irena was inspecting Jewish families for contagious disease, but really she was looking for children that she could save.

Irena and her friends started with orphan children because many parents had died, leaving children orphaned. But they eventually started trying to convince parents to let them take their children to safety. She told them she would keep track of the children, and after the war, she would make sure they got back to their parents. Some parents simply couldn't do it. Irena was a young mother herself, and it was horrible for her to have to break up families. The parents would say, "Why should we trust you?" Irena said, "You shouldn't trust me. But there's nothing else you can do." The parents would ask, "Can you guarantee my child will live?" And she said, "I can't guarantee anything. I don't know even know if I will get out of the ghetto alive today. But I can guarantee they will die if they stay here." Everyone knew there were plans to empty the ghetto, and everyone was headed for Treblinka.

Irena and her team saved children in many different ways. Babies were sedated and hidden in toolboxes and bags of potatoes, and carried over the border of the ghetto that way. Larger children were put in trashcans or coffins or supply boxes. Some were smuggled through sewers and underground tunnels. Irena was legally able to take seriously ill children out of the ghetto, but she got children to pretend they were very sick so she could take healthy children too. An ambulance driver smuggled extra children under the stretchers in his ambulance. He had a big dog that sat with him, and he trained the dog to bark loudly at the border, in case one of the children might make a noise.

They also were able to save children through buildings that straddled the ghetto border. There was a church that had entrances inside and outside the ghetto. The front door to the outside world was guarded by soldiers, who questioned anyone who came out. Sendler and her group trained the little Jewish children about how to act like a Christian in church, so they wouldn't give themselves away. They taught them prayers that every Christian child would know. They would sneak the children into the church on the ghetto side, remove clothes that had yellow stars on them, taking on their new identity as Polish Catholic children, complete with documents. They would then walk out the front door with a new identity. None of the children they trained were caught coming out of the church.

The underground had ten people working in the camps smuggling the children out. They had ten people working outside the camps relocating the children to convent orphanages and new families. Five people were in charge of getting documentation for the children to show that they were Christian; forged birth certificates and baptismal certificates. The children were given new names and new identities. These weren't real adoptions; everyone who sheltered a child was told that the children were to be given back to their parents after the war. You must understand that in Poland at that time, to hide a Jew of any age was an offence punishable by death.

Irena and her team saved 2500 Jewish children. When she took a child from its parents, she would write its name and its parents' names on a piece of tissue paper, along with the child's new names, and who it was placed with. She collected these pieces of paper, and put them in jars and buried them under an apple tree.

Irena worked for 18 months in the ghetto, but eventually she came under suspicion. The Nazis started following her. She changed her address several times, but five months after the Ghetto was closed she was arrested after a tip by an informant. She was interrogated and tortured, the interrogators broke her leg and her foot, but she would not tell them anything about the children, or where they were, or who else was in the organization. In prison, she did not have a bible. The only thing she had with her in the prison cell was a little card with the word, "Jesus, I trust in you." She was sentenced to death by firing squad. The day of her execution, the Polish Underground was able to bribe a soldier, who checked her off as being shot, while in reality allowing her to slip away into the forest. She went into hiding, but she saw the posters that listed the people who had been executed: her name was on it. Irena Sendler survived the war, although for the rest of her life she used crutches because of the torture she had undergone in prison.

When the war was over, Irena went to the apple tree and dug up the jars, and began the process of trying to match the children with their parents or their relatives. Unfortunately, only 1% of the Jews who had been in the ghetto survived. Almost all the parents had been murdered at Treblinka. Very few matches could happen.

In later years, her own children faced discrimination in Communist Poland. Because of her past activities in the Underground movement, she was labelled a subversive. Her children were not accepted into Warsaw University because of what she had done in the Warsaw ghetto.

It wasn't until she was in her sixties that the Israeli government honoured Irena with an award, and in her late 70's that Pope John Paul II honoured her for her sacrifices. In 1979 she met John Paul II, and as a gift, she gave him the card that she had kept since her time in prison that said, "Jesus, I trust in you."

Her story was largely unknown until in 1999 a group of four high school students from Kansas had to do a project for National History Day. They decided they wanted to do a play about someone who helped Jews during the Holocaust. Their teacher gave them a box of newspaper clippings to look through. There they saw one sentence that said Irena Sendler had been instrumental in saving 2500 children from the Warsaw ghetto. This intrigued the girls and they wanted to learn more. The teacher thought that surely this was a typo...how could one person save that many children? It started the girls on a quest to find the story. They eventually found out that Irena Sendler, 89 years old, was still alive in Poland. They communicated with her, and wrote a play called "Life in a Jar" which eventually was performed around the United States. Eventually through the work of a donor, the girls were able to go to Warsaw to meet Irena. The play is still being performed around the world. It was through the students telling the story that Irena's story became more widely known in the world.

Eight years later, when Irena was 97 years old she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, although she didn't win. A documentary and a movie were made about her life. She was interviewed about her activities during the war, and she said, "In my dreams I still hear the cries when the children left their parents." And she said, "I could have done more. This regret will follow me to my death." She died in 2008 at the age of 98.

Now Irena did not as a young person set out to be a person who saved babies from being murdered. But this was the opportunity that came into her path. She had been taught by her parents to help people. She saw how she could give, and she gave sacrificially, freely, lovingly.

I was reading a commentary on that time period of the war, and the dilemma that many Christians faced. I want to read a quote, it's from the book Kingdom Ethics by Glen Stassen and David Gushee.

"It was not enough to pray for the Jews. It was not enough to hope for the best for Jews, to have feelings of compassion towards Jews or to dream of a world in which neither Jews nor anyone else would be murdered. Nor was it enough to have the intention of helping Jews, to

talk about helping Jews or make plans to help Jews. Nor, for that matter, was it enough to believe in Jesus, go to church, receive the sacraments, read the Bible or say “the sinner’s prayer.” What had to happen was for Christians to welcome needy Jewish strangers into their homes, to provide this much food and that much money, offer hiding places and hygienic services and false identification and transportation and protection, and to do such things indefinitely at constant risk.” (Glen Stassen and David Gushee, Kingdom Ethics Intervarsity Press, 2003, p. 490.)

The writer goes on to say that only a very small minority of Christians were willing to give help like that. The ones that did give help came from families where hands-on giving was both taught and modelled by their parents.

Many of us know John 3:16, “For God so loved the world...” Another verse that we should all have memorized is I John 3:16: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” And a few verses later...“Let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (I John 3:18) If we truly believe that God calls us to give love, then it’s not just something we think about. We can’t think that having compassionate thought is enough: we must do concrete, visible, and tangible things.

Not everyone is going to save the lives of children like Irena did, God puts different opportunities in the paths of each of us. We are each given opportunities to be kind, to people we know and also to strangers.

While some giving is done in secret (for example, Irena’s work was not publically acknowledged till very late in her life), other giving cannot be hidden. Giving changes us. When we have truly given our lives over to God, people notice that. People can see something different about you. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”(Matthew 5:16) We want to be a community where people walk in and feel, “There’s something different here. There is a feeling of great love, of kindness, a spirit of generosity.”

This week we are having two services in our church for people who lived very generous lives. We hear stories about how the way they lived changed the people they met. They lived the way they did because they believed in Jesus, they trusted in Jesus. We have many examples around us of people who make a difference in the world through their kindness and their generosity. Many magi...wise people, who give their lives sacrificially to our Saviour.

This is the first Sunday of 2015. As your pastor, I want you to go into your year carrying this card, the card that Irena Sendler carried with her. [small business cards with the words “Jesus, I trust in you” had been included in the bulletin.] It’s the gift of the magi; that we should remember to trust in God. I invite you to put the card in your wallet or your purse, where you will come across it this year. If you trust in Jesus, you will be a giving person, and God will bring opportunities to give into your life. I pray that you will have the courage to trust in Jesus.

“Jesus, I trust in you.” This is an Epiphany worth remembering.