

A birthday present in the manger scene

We found a small, wrapped box next to Jesus. Should we open it?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 20, 2017](#) issue



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In the front yard of the Kansas City church I served, we used to set up a huge life-size crèche every December. The plywood-and-timber structure was heavy and cumbersome, and the crèche always gave us fits. If there wasn't a spotty electrical connection involving the light over the manger, there were external forces at play. One year a pickup truck veered off the road and took out two of the Magi. We picked up the fiberglass shards the next morning, buried inside the flattened velvet robes and matted crowns of the crash victims. Mary and Joseph were out frankincense and myrrh that Christmas.

The worst problem we faced had to do with the disappearance of Jesus. Someone absconded with the infant five of my eight years at that church. It was like a popular sport. Thieves never took an interest in the crib or hay. All they wanted was Jesus. They never even left a ransom note. I could only hope that Jesus ended up in the

hands of someone who needed his presence more urgently than our aging, battleship gray crèche.

One morning in December 1992, as I was making bed-check rounds to see if Jesus was still asleep on the hay—he was, though with eyes open—I noticed a small gift beside him. The handwritten label taped to the wrapping paper read, “Happy Brithday Jesus.” *Brithday* was misspelled. Was this a booby trap? A makeshift bomb? A candid-camera prank? Or a real gift? After deliberating on whether removing it from the manger constituted a sacrilege, I brought the package in from the cold. An office colleague and I faced the next moral quandary: Should we unwrap this present? Curiosity decided for us.

An old Shake 'n Bake pork seasoning box was beneath the red paper. Inside the box were 33 cents and a piece of notebook paper with the words:

Dear Jesus, Happy Brithday. Here's some small change for you to feed someone who is hungry. I give myself to be kind to others as you were kind to other people on earth. Love, Maria

I knew right away who Maria was. She lived on our campus in the house that we owned and operated for persons living with chronic mental illness. A tender soul who topped out at five feet two inches tall, if that, Maria was plagued by a collision of voices inside her head constantly telling her what to do and think and feel. Paranoid schizophrenia was her demon. Legion could have been her name.

Her mother or father gave her the name Maria, a name she lived up to if Mother Mary's generous love is what inspired her parents. Maria had a big heart she shared with a few whom she trusted. She seemed to know that love was the only thing she had to give away, and she knew that that love came from the Lord.

For 25 years now, I've kept that box and note and the change inside. It sits in my desk drawer as a sacred relic of sorts, something I'm unwilling to part with. It may have been intended for Jesus, but it keeps on giving a beautiful reminder to me: love is the best thing I have to give away, and the only love I have is that which I've received from the Lord.

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