

Sighing at the angel tree

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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Our congregation has, for many years, had a Christmastime angel tree, in which members purchase requested gifts for families in our local Head Start program. Do not get me wrong: this is great. It's a way to make the holiday a little merrier for families who (I assume) don't have a lot of extra disposable income.

And every year, our family waits until the later weeks of the angel tree to pick up our cards, because while there are many who want to buy clothes for adorable baby boys and five-year-old girls, other gift recipients are simply not as much fun to shop for. This year we picked up cards for a family with four boys, ages seven to 18. And off to Fred Meyer I went.

True confession: I do not enjoy shopping of any sort—grocery shopping, clothes shopping, Christmas gift shopping. I just don't. I like the idea of giving people presents, in theory. I like the idea of the recipient knowing that I care about them or was thinking about them. But going out to the store, at night, in the rain, in the cold: meh. A recent trip to the mall confirmed for me what I've suspected for a while now: hell is Macy's.

So last Monday night, while my kid was at church choir practice and my spouse was at church checking his e-mail, I headed out, angel tree cards transcribed into a nice little list. Boys' undershirts, size medium. Boys' undershirts, size large. Medium boys' dress shirt. Large boys' pajamas. Tennis shoes, size 3.5. It just about broke my heart, knowing that some mom or dad desperately needs basic items for their sons, knowing that the last things those boys probably want Santa to bring them is dumb old clothes.

There were a few fun things on the list—a twin bed set (way out of our price range). Boat Legos. Boat Legos? I called my husband from the toy aisle. "It says Boat Legos. Would Pirate Legos count?" I spent twenty minutes in the children's shoe section. There were no size 3.5 boys tennis shoes. There were fours and fives. Nike and Adidas. \$50 a pair. \$50 a pair? For the youngest kid, so they can't be passed down?

That's a lot of money for shoes the kid will grow out of. But maybe there is nothing worse than wearing hand-me-down boys' tennis shoes. And \$50—that's just a couple of lunches out for our family. The size four Nikes went into the basket.

I will be the first to admit I overthink things, including the angel tree gifts. I spent more on the gifts for these four boys than I spent on my husband and child and that feels about right. I worry that I misread the size requests, that Pirate Legos are not the same thing as Boat Legos, that these kids will open presents they did not want and realize, once again, on Christmas morning, that they do not have as many choices as other kids. They won't get the brand new PlayStation 17, or whatever number it's up to. They'll get undershirts and pajamas, which may or may not fit. But maybe it will bring Mom a smile.

What I wish I could do for my angel tree family is know them and find out how Head Start was for them, and see what I can do to help them have more choices at Christmas and all year. But like the Santa who fills the Christmas stockings, the angels of the tree are anonymous. Maybe it's better that way.

But still ... I wish them a Merry Christmas. And I wish they could have a merrier one.

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