

THE GIFTS OF CHRIST

Matthew 2:1-12

One of the most famous Christmas stories is entitled *The Gift of the Magi*. O. Henry, its author was widely admired for his ability to create stories with unexpected endings, with twists and surprises. The suggested tale has but two characters, a new groom and a young bride. The economic life was nearly desperate but each retained a favorite possession. His gold pocket watch meant as much to him as her long hair did to her.

When Christmas was upon them, each pondered a gift that would be delightful surprise for the other. He decided on a pair of combs she could use to decorate her lovely hair, she on a gold watch chain so that he could carry his watch wherever he went. But, being virtually penniless, what might they do?

We may be surprised that on Christmas, the gifts were given---to a young man who had sold his pocket watch and to a young woman who had sold her hair. It may be concluded that the gifts were now worthless except as we understand the depth of sacrifice each was willing to undertake to purchase the gifts. The author does not detail laughter or tears at the giving nor does he suggest that each understood the meaning of the gift.

Instead, the author closes the tale in this manner:

The magi, as you know, were wise men---wonderfully wise men---who brought gifts to the newborn Christ-child. They were the first to give Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were doubtless wise ones. And here I have told you the story of two children who were not wise. Each sold the most valuable thing he owned in order to buy a gift for the other. But let me speak a last word to the wise of these days: Of all who give gifts, these two were the most wise. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the most wise. Everywhere they are the wise ones. They are the magi.

Even the postscript of the author does not reveal much about the wisdom of the giving, though it does point us to the story of the magi found in Matthew. His account has several aspects to it, each of which might bring forth a truth worthy of consideration. The magi were from the East, geographically and spiritually beyond the community of Israel. King Herod quickly understood the threat this infant because, in the theology of Matthew, if he were to be born in Bethlehem, he might be the new king, fulfilling a particular prophecy. The magi not only follow stars, they

respond to dreams, and the child is spared. Many, however, have meditated upon the gifts given out of their treasure chests: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Two of the three were mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah, the third a mystery to most. The hymn writer suggests the gold will surely crown him a king, the frankincense lift his prayers to heaven, and the myrrh as bitter perfume will be used in the tomb. Others have suggested that if Mary and Joseph would sell these treasures on the open market, they would be able to purchase better sacrifices in the future.

If we were to suggest that gold express power as it surely does, that incense provoke the holy within, and that myrrh proclaim a willingness to sacrifice and even grievously, we may see that the magi's gifts were little more than indicators of the life of this child. He would have power, he will be holy, he will sacrifice.

All of this suggests that he will be a king different from Herod...and all the others. His power will not be used to coerce but to convince. His holiness will not separate him from others but create a relationship between God and humanity, a relationship based upon love. His sacrifice will be a result of his willingness, willingness to trust in God. The gifts of the Christ are suggested in the gifts of the magi but they will be received and shared in a way that will bring new life, abundant life, eternal life for Jerusalem, for Israel, for all the world.

Because she had missed one of the sessions, a class member wrote a check as her Christmas gift, writing on the memo line "Advent Conspiracy. The class may have hoped that the word of such a conspiracy might have been kept secret, at least for awhile, knowing how mysterious and threatening conspiracies tend to be. What the check caused, instead, was a need to bring the study of Advent to a different conclusion. Rather than merely bind up the learnings in a convenient phrase: spend less, give more, costly, bridge the gap, the class was forced to actually act. What would be done with this special part of the Christmas offering, the rest of which will be directed to the General Fund? After much consideration, the class has decided to ask that this giving be directed to _____ as a sign of putting the Advent conspiracy into action.

What sort of gift, small as it may be, has this become? Will it become only a gift to a community in need? Or could it be an indication of the intention of the giver, an intention that may last a lifetime?

We come today to receive a gift of bread and juice. Gastronomically, it is not much. It does represent the willingness of Christ to give his life for all. It is an invitation to go and do likewise. Thanks be to God. Amen.