

"Three Precious Gifts" - January 11, 2015

Three Precious Gifts
Rev. Ruth Martz

Matthew 2: 1-12
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A congregation is formed out of the gifts that people offer. A world is shaped and transformed by the gifts that people are willing to offer and share. Everyone has a gift, all gifts are needed, and all gifts are welcome.

Two thousand years ago, the Magi celebrated the Christ child with three of the most valuable items in the ancient world. They brought precious gifts from their far-away lands and fell to their knees before the one whom they recognized as the promised Messiah. Myrrh was the most costly gift; equivalent to about \$4000 per pound today; gold and frankincense were equivalent to \$500-600 per pound. But the gifts of the wise men were not only of monetary value; they were also gifts of health and long life. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were among the earliest and most prized healing medicines.

What gifts equal to those of the wise men might we offer to Christ, to God, to others in this New Year? How can we demonstrate the enriching, healing, transformative presence that the birth of Christ brings into the world? The wise men offer their gifts quietly and humbly, and they go away marveling, praising God. They go home profoundly changed by the gifts they have given and the gifts they have received. Let us follow in their footsteps.

There are an infinite number of gifts that we can bring, but this morning, I would like to suggest three possible gifts. They are extremely valuable and not always easy to give, but oh, what a difference they can make!

We have already opened the gift of friendship, and all of you know its sweet fragrance and healing powers. We anticipate and celebrate the gift of friendships that we will form with members of the Checheche church in Zimbabwe. As with most beginning friendships, we don't know exactly how our relationships will develop or deepen. All we know for sure is that faith in God through Jesus Christ forms the foundation of our partnership and that our prayers are already connecting us with the Checheche congregation today. A new kind of friendship will emerge and I suspect we will receive a lot more than we give, especially in light of our God of surprises and epiphanies!

The second gift is that of gold, considered to be one of nature's most perfect substances. Gold was always believed to have supernatural healing powers. Today, gold injections help people with rheumatoid arthritis.

Our gold this morning is the gift of goodness, the goodness of God, Creator,

Christ and Holy Spirit Gold, the goodness that lies at the heart of our being.

Now, goodness is not at all easy to define, since what we may see as good in one situation may be viewed by someone else as fair, bad or even evil. Goodness also encompasses so many qualities: kindness and generosity, moral excellence or what is considered a virtue. I especially like one description of goodness as “the best part of anything, essence, strength.”

Goodness is the best part of us, born of God’s essence, the spirit and power of goodness.

In Scripture, *hesed* is one of the Hebrew words often translated in English as “good” or “goodness.” *Hesed* means loving-kindness.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for goodness indicates zealous activity in doing good. Goodness is not passive; it is meant to be put into action. The apostle Paul adds another dimension by linking goodness with knowledge; goodness does whatever loving wisdom calls for in a given situation.

The best part of us, dynamic loving-kindness and wisdom—is the gift of goodness. You’ve heard it before and you will hear it again, but I would simply like to lift up the spirit of goodness that is revealed through our “random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.” Whoever thought of this particular way of calling us to goodness surely gave us a holy gift.

- Think how the other person will feel when you wave them into that perfect parking place that opened up, even though you were there first. Isn't it possible that they might then smile and thank the check-out clerk, wishing her a nice afternoon - and mean it?
- Imagine what it might mean to the volunteers and the patrons of Bread & Roses, or a local soup kitchen, if one week, you brought small pots of flowers to put on each table?
- When you take a walk, how about bringing along two bags, one for picking up litter and the other for spreading birdseed---or wildflower seeds in the spring.
- In Worship or at church events, when you see someone sitting alone or someone whose name you don’t know, go over and join him or her. Just do it!
- Thinking about someone? Call him; write her a note or email.

I did that last week, called an old friend whom I hadn’t talked to in 2 years. Why hadn’t we done this before, we asked each other? We tend to do things like this during the Christmas season; why not the whole year long?

The possibilities are limited only by our imagination. Go ahead and practice extravagant goodness...reveal the best part of you, born of God’s essence, truly a gift of gold....

I've put two golden sheets of paper downstairs in the Undercroft, and in the next few months, I invite you to write down any random act of kindness or senseless act of beauty that you do or that someone does for you. Let's inspire one another! Whatever we do and however we do it, let's share the gift of goodness all over the place.

The third gift that the wise men brought was myrrh, which in the ancient world was added to perfumes, used for a variety of medicinal purposes, and viewed as something that might prolong life. Paradoxically, myrrh was also widely used for embalming. This is why Christians have viewed this gift as foreshadowing Jesus' death, although that was perhaps not the original intent of the Magi. Myrrh also served as an anesthetic. Jesus was given wine mixed with myrrh to alleviate his suffering on the cross. Today, researchers are experimenting with the curative powers of myrrh.

Our myrrh this morning is the gift of mercy, which includes both compassion and forgiveness. This is perhaps a harder gift for us to give than friendship and goodness. This may also be the most profound and life-changing gift for us to receive.

One definition of mercy is: "compassionate or forgiving treatment of one who could be treated harshly or who is in great distress." We may think of the mercy that an offender receives from a judge or a person in power. We think of divine mercy, for mercy is also "a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion."

We are created in the image of God, and therefore called to give to others the blessing of compassion. Face to face encounters where we demonstrate compassion to those in need or in bad situations may often take us out of our comfort zone. It's so easy to harden our hearts when we think someone has done something stupid or irresponsible or wrong. Acts of mercy don't have to include moral instruction, for mercy in and of itself has the power to change people.

Created in God's image, we are called to give the gift of forgiveness to those who have wronged us or hurt us in some way. How hard this can be, depending on the offense! As you know, forgiveness is often a process that takes time and lots of prayer. God knows when we're trying to work through anger, hurt or guilt... It's hard to imagine Jesus praying on the cross to God: *God, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* Mercy, divine and human, has the power to astound and transform.

So, put mercy in your back pocket this year and see how often you are able to pull it out and show compassion or forgiveness or both. Don't save mercy only for the big stuff. You know how the smallest grievance or quarrel can fester or escalate in a flash. Like myrrh, mercy brings healing and may even prolong our lives!

As the wise men knelt to offer their precious gifts to the Christ child, they received the gift of divine revelation and enlightenment, the gift of joy and hopes fulfilled, wonder and awe as they encountered God in their midst. They also gained understanding about the dangers in this world, the malice of King Herod, and the threat that the Messiah posed to the powers that be. The magi wisely chose to go home a different way; they had experienced an epiphany. All whom they encountered would be touched in some gracious way by the gifts the wise men brought home with them.

In her poem, Madeleine L'Engle asks a powerful question. *May and should, O God, and might a star, a wind, a laugh, a cry still come from one—the blazing word of power and might—to use our gifts of gold and myrrh and frankincense as needed, as our intention was to do the right?*

Like the wise men who followed a star, may we, might we, still receive words and signs from God calling us to use our gifts for the shaping and transformation of our world? YES, without a doubt! Let us offer the gifts of goodness, friendship and mercy, for the glory of God and for the healing of all peoples.
Renew, redeem, oh, Love, until we, too, may dazzle bright.

Hallelujah! Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4.* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

Huey, Kate. www.ucc.org . *Sermon Seeds* for January 4, 2015.

Merrill, Timothy. www.homileticsonline.com . Sermons and commentaries on Matthew 2: 1-12, in particular, one sermon, “Three Wise Gifts” and commentaries for information about gold, frankincense and myrrh.

www.workingpreacher.org . Commentaries and reflections on Matthew 2: 1-12