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On Giving Livestock to Jesus

Deuteronomy 10:12-13 The Message So now Israel, what do you think God expects from you? Just this: Live in his presence in holy reverence, follow the road he sets out for you, love him, serve God, your God, with everything you have in you, obey the commandments and regulations of God that I'm commanding you today-live a good life.

Romans 12:4-8 The Message In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't. If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.

Perhaps you have heard the question, *"What would have happened if there had been Three Wise Women instead of Three Wise Men?"* Well, the tongue-in-cheek answer that you also may have heard is this: Unlike men, they would have asked directions immediately upon starting their trip, which would have allowed them to arrive on time; they would have helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole and brought practical gifts (babies aren't known to need a lot of frankincense) like cute little outfits that baby Jesus could have worn on his trip home. But, no, we have three wise men, not wise women.

We continue our Advent theme of "What Can I Give Him," based on the beautiful

poem by Christina Rossetti, which in turn became the hymn “In the Bleak Midwinter” and whose fourth verse we are singing each Sunday and which is guiding the sermons for this Advent season. Today’s line from that verse is *“If I were a shepherd, I would bring him a lamb.”* Now, if I had had the benefit of having heard Jake Boley’s wonderful Moment for Mission last Sunday for the children’s fundraising initiative for the Heifer Project, I might have titled this sermon “On Bringing a Water Buffalo to Jesus,” because Jake’s wonderful eloquence reminded us of our opportunity to make possible what may seem at first blush like an odd gift – a very large and ponderous example of livestock – that in fact can free a family from the tyranny of poverty. And you responded – after Jake’s plea you gave \$360 last Sunday to bring that buffalo to that family. I believe that Jesus would indeed be pleased and proud. For while the baby Jesus might have had little use for a water buffalo, the man Jesus reminded us that “whenever you did it for the least of these, you did it for me.” So, it turns out that bringing livestock to Jesus may not be such a bad idea after all; in fact, it is a profoundly good idea.

That little shepherd boy in Rossetti’s poem said he would bring Jesus a lamb if he could. Why? Well, after all, lambs were what he knew. He encountered lambs every day. His worldview was formed by dealing with sheep. He would give what he knew. But in fact, every one of us tends to give what we know best. Even more deeply, though, we all tend to interpret the world and the events around us in the ways that are comfortable and conform to what we already think and believe. About twenty years or so ago, the movie “Flash Dance” was released. It’s a movie about an “exotic dancer” who is extraordinarily talented and longs to become a “real” dancer by going to ballet school. By day, she is a welder. It’s a powerful movie full of some pretty amazing

performances which remind you of the sheer beauty of the human body. But not too long after the movie was released, one of the segments on “Saturday Night Live” was a fake review of the movie by a purported professional welder who blasted the movie up one side and down the other because the welding scenes showed, in his opinion, poor welding technique. The exquisite artistry of the dancers received not a mention from this faux reviewer, the deep power that art has to entice people to strive for greater beauty in their lives wasn’t even on his radar; no, the only thing that mattered to him was that the welding wasn’t up to snuff. In other words, he too gave what he knew and in this case completely missed the point of the movie and completely missed the opportunity to be transformed in the ways that powerful art can indeed move us and change us.

Now that review, of course, was tongue in cheek but it does point out that all of us are indeed inclined to *stay with what we know*. As the old bromide goes, we often much prefer the evil that we know to the good that we don’t. We often find ourselves falling back on stereotypes, we often choose comfort and familiarity over uncertainty and uncomfortableness. We humans abhor chaos and so we grab after structure even if it is structure that stifles. We don’t like ambiguity and often therefore push for certainty even where there is none to be had - we’ll invent it if need be. If we are shepherds, we bring lambs. If we are welders, we see the world in terms of melted metals. If we are fearful, we too often judge folks by how they are different rather than by how they can teach us. If a mindset of scarcity is our inclination, then we will more often than not see a world of scarcity which is scary and immobilizing. If we are inclined to be really good at fear and worry, if that is what we know and do well, then

then no doubt we will find ourselves fearful and worried people gazing upon a fearsome and worrisome world.

But let us ask: what gift would God wish us to bring? Now, we won't be bringing lambs into the sanctuary. We won't be doing any welding on the chancel. But we – each and every one of us, you and I – will bring gifts to this hour and to this day and to this week. What gift does God wish from us in the face of our temptation to sometimes bring the part of us that is not our best, that is fearful and worried and suspicious, that finds it too easy to look through a lens of cynicism or jadedness? The passage from Deuteronomy that we read, freshly translated by Eugene Petersen, pretty well sums up what is on God's gift list for us: to love and serve God with everything that we have and are, living, thereby, in God's presence. What does that mean? Just this I think: we all have been given, as Paul so compellingly writes in our other scripture, a variety of gifts and talents and functions and abilities and predilections. And when we see the message of Deuteronomy and Paul in light of one another, what we realize is this: what we can bring to Jesus in this Advent season, what it means to live "in the presence of God," is to consciously and creatively choose to bring the **best** of those talents and abilities and predilections to our life, to our judgments, to our interactions with one another.

But here's the thing: sometimes that will mean NOT bringing, not giving what we know. Sometimes it will mean giving something that we didn't think we had in us to give. Sometimes it will mean responding to someone with charity and benefit-of-the-doubt when we are so much more inclined to go with our previous predilections and maybe respond with suspiciousness or cynicism or wariness. Sometimes it will mean

interpreting a situation in the best possible light instead of one that is allegedly more “realistic.” That shepherd boy would give Jesus a lamb; that welder would see the world in terms of welding. And it’s thereby possible that both of them missed far greater opportunities to give, to love, to serve.

Do you see what I’m saying? For, after all, God Himself, I think, in the incarnation itself decided NOT “go with what He knew.” What do I mean? Well think about it: if God had simply gone with what He knew, then there would likely have been no fresh gift of grace that comes at Christmas, that came in that Babe of Bethlehem. For what had God’s experience of humanity been? Well, while there had surely been some wondrous moments, there were too, too many moments when humanity behaved horribly. There were too many times that even the people that God chose turned their backs on the expectations and hopes that God had that folks be treated with justice, that widows and orphans be cared for, that aliens and strangers not be marginalized and persecuted, that wealth be used for the common good and not simply to line one’s own pockets. Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets carried a consistent message that called on the people to do these things, to reject fear and xenophobia, to practice hospitality to all as the most God-like of virtues, to accompany worship always, always with justice for the hurting and the oppressed. But, we know that God’s experience, indeed, was that humanity too often failed to live up to or even attempt to live up to these expectations.

So, if God had “gone with what He knew,” then I suspect that God might have responded in cynicism, might have said “why bother?”, and there would be no incarnation, no birth that night so long ago, no “unto us a child is born,” no Advent, no

Christmas.

But God didn't go simply with what He knew. God Himself risked going beyond His experience and in the birth of Christ offered a renewed gift to humanity of grace, of hope, of peace. Might that be our example as well on this second Sunday of Advent? The poet Ann Weems has written some powerful and apt reflections on Christmas. Here is one of her poems that I think speaks to us on this day, on this topic of calling us to go beyond what we know; hear her words:

*The Christmas Sprit
Is that hope
Which tenaciously clings
to the hearts of the faithful
And announces
In the face of any "Herods" the world can produce
And all the inn doors slammed in our faces
And all the dark nights of our souls.
That with God
All things are possible
And even now
unto us
a Child is Born¹*

If God had "stayed with what He knew," though, that Child would not have been born – for God's experience, like ours too often, is that the evilness of too many Herods is far too real, and that too many doors are slammed against too many people indeed who are seeking hope and sanctuary. But God did not. God risked an amazing, astounding, audacious thing at Christmas. And so, how about us, how about us? This Advent season can indeed be a time when **we** go beyond what we know, when we risk

¹Cited in "Church Chat," the newsletter of First United Methodist Church, China Grove, North Carolina. December 2011. <http://www.chinagrovefumc.com/clientimages/39645/cc1211.pdf>

loving beyond what we thought we could do or whom we could love, when we risk moving beyond the constraints of courage that may have confined us. What will you give Him? What will you give Him?