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The Gifts We Bring

(Matthew 2:1-12 NRSV) In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Did it feel odd to sing "We Three Kings" this morning? Does it feel to you – as it does to me – that Christmas was a very long time ago? I recall as a boy, there were never any Christmas lights or decorations or displays or Christmas sales until the day after Thanksgiving – on which, by the way, the malls were all closed. And then, on Saturday, for the very first time, the merchants would have out all their Christmas wares and all their Christmas displays. Doesn't that sound quaint these days?!? But even back in those ancient days, with only one month of anticipation for Christmas, that by January 6, the date commemorating the Wise Men's visit to Jesus, it seemed that indeed Christmas was a long, long time ago. How much worse that feeling can be nowadays, when the stores have had their Christmas merchandise up since Labor Day, and the stores have been playing Christmas muzak since before Halloween!

But, of course, this feeling we may have this morning that Christmas seems like

it was a long time ago, is at odds with the historic understanding of the Church. For In both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, December 25 is understood to be only the **beginning** of the Christmas season which indeed lasts until today, January 6, Epiphany Sunday. In fact, historically, the celebration of Epiphany commemorating the visit of the wise men is actually much older than the celebration of Christmas. But for many folks, Epiphany has become almost an unknown part of the story of the birth and life of Christ – probably, as I say, because by this time in January we’re ready for Christmas to be gone and we associate the story of the Wise Men more with Christmas itself than with twelve days later.

Yet, even if Epiphany is nowadays much less celebrated than Christmas Day, Epiphany is still a very important day to remember, because the traditional story of this day of the Wise Men’s visit has much to teach us, and one of the things that the story teaches us is something about **gifts**. Now, comedian Dave Barry says that you can tell that the Wise Men were *men* because there is no mention in the story of the gifts being wrapped. But whether wrapped or not, they were both costly gifts and they were lavish gifts. And most importantly for us this morning, these gifts from the Wise Men were expressions of themselves; they were giving something that God had endowed them with, using the gifts that they themselves had been given to in turn give to another.

And that’s where I want to dive more deeply into this story today. For when looked at that way, the story poses for us the question: ***What gifts has God given you?*** One preacher rightly reminds us that our gifts “*are your talents, abilities, aptitudes, events that have happened to you.... Your gifts are the sum total of all the resources that God has given to you*” and “*God is enormously generous with each one of us.*”¹ So I want to invite you to reflect with me honestly this morning on the gifts that God has given you, and given our church. To do so, let me use some of the thoughts

¹http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_discovering.htm

of a writer named Mary Schramm from her book Gifts of Grace; she makes three points about the gifts that each one of us has been given.

First, she says that **we best know and develop our gifts in relationships**. That's so true, isn't it? For example, if you have a gift, a talent for cooking it is much less fun to cook only for yourself, isn't it? And even more to the point, when you exercise that gift only on yourself you're just not very apt to grow and develop your talent. But when you use that God-given gift to create things that delight the eye and taste and tongue of others whom you care for, your gift just keeps getting better, doesn't it? It grows. **Every** gift that God has given you or me is both best discovered and best deepened in our relationships with one another. A gift for public speaking does little when you speak only to yourself. A gift for singing is much less fun when you only sing in the shower and aren't using your voice for the enjoyment of others. And, moreover, when you reach out and cultivate new relationships, you often will in fact discover new gifts or old ones that you'd forgotten about. A new grandchild brings out in you traits you never knew you had. A new friendship evokes from you new abilities and ways of seeing that you never realized you were capable of. Or, new people in our beloved church bring their own new gifts and as we grow in relationship with them we discover that **we** are capable of doing new things that we didn't realize we had a knack for and that we are enjoying those new things rather than seeing them as a threat somehow. So, point one: **Your God-given gifts are best discovered and grown in relationship to other people.**

Schramm's second point about our God-given gifts is this: **We are called to truly accept and enjoy the gifts that we have been given.**² One of the oldest traditions attested to in scripture is that God wants to take delight in human beings

²In Markquart's sermon, from which I taken Schramm's schema, he notes that Schramm actually has five steps; I have concatenated these into three steps here.

themselves delighting in the gifts that He has given them. This can be seen from the first lines of the Book of Genesis where God created the first man and woman, giving them gifts and talents and opportunities, told them to make use of those gifts and talents, and then called the whole thing good. I'll say it again: God **delights** in our acknowledging, accepting, and enjoying the gifts that we have been given. But sometimes you and I act as if we don't really believe that. We downplay the gifts given to us, the talents that we truly have. We can even think it is somehow wrong or unseemly to enjoy those gifts and talents, or even to acknowledge them. There are even times when our very politeness – a good thing, mind you, that generally speaking the world could use more of! – gets in the way. I don't know whether this happens in your household but in my household I know that Barbara will sometimes thank me for something that I've done, something that is an expression of my gifts, my aptitudes, my talents. Maybe it was to figure out how get her misbehaving computer to work right again. Maybe it was something else for which I have a knack. But I sometimes find that my response to her "thank you" – instead of simply saying "you're welcome" – is to say "no, no, no, it was nothing. It's not worth mentioning. It's no big deal." But this is "false modesty," and it's a habit that can suck the joy both out of exercising your gifts and out of your relationships. And, interestingly, when we **are** more able to in fact acknowledge and enjoy the gifts that God has given **us**, we will also, in turn, be more able to acknowledge and enjoy the gifts that God has given others! **So, second point: God calls us to honestly acknowledge and enjoy the gifts that we have been given.**

Schramm's third point about gifts is this: we are called to **develop our gifts and put in them in the service of God**. We have all known people who didn't develop some gift that God had given them – often out of fear – and that gift atrophied and the

person would find much later that he or she regretted letting that happen. I have a teacher friend who once described one of his students as being someone who was “*doing less with more than anyone he’d ever known.*” Ouch. I hope nothing like that is ever said of you or of me. One of the very best things that can happen in our lives is when our church is always a place that encourages us to develop our gifts. Now, sometimes that will mean challenging us, won’t it? I’m very grateful, for example, that all of my life the church has kept prodding me and reminding me that my gift for empathy with the misfortunes of others needs to be wider than my own selfishness might otherwise decide. I am grateful that the church has pushed me to use that gift to remember that the answer to Jesus’ question “Who is my neighbor” is “*Everyone.*” When you and I are courageous enough to accept God’s offer to develop the gifts we have been given, the results can be marvelous.

I want to close this morning’s sermon a little bit differently. I have an assignment for you. At each outside ends of each pew, there is a small stack of half-pages of paper; I’d like each one of you to take one of those half-sheets now and find a pen or pencil to write with. I’ll give you a moment to do that.... Now, here’s the assignment: I want you to do two things: first, I want you to write down two gifts that God has given you. They might be two traits that you have. They might be two talents. They might be two aptitudes. And then, second, I want you to write down two gifts or two talents or two aptitudes that God has given this church. Now, don’t worry, I won’t ask you to share your answers publicly but I do want you to take a moment to write down those two sets of two things: two gifts or talents or aptitudes that God has given you, and two that God has given this church. I’ll give you two minutes.

[Give folks ~ two minutes to write]

Now, here is the rest of the assignment and it also has two parts: first, take that page

home and stick it on your refrigerator or by your bed or in your garage where you will see it and use it to remind yourselves to pray that God will better help you acknowledge, enjoy, develop, and put to God's use these gifts given to you and to our church. Pray that you or we won't fail to take God up on the opportunity to deepen the gifts given to us and our church.

But the second part of the assignment is to come to this Table this morning, the ultimate gift, the ultimate nourishment for lives. Come and realize that in the bread and the cup are given to us the ultimate gift – Christ's amazing, overwhelming, boundless, and eternal love, hospitality, and care. And know, as you come, that it is because of the gift of this meal, the sign and symbol of God's many, **many** gifts to us all, that we can put all of our gifts in God's service. That prospect excites me as we begin this new year. How about you?