

Re: Gifting

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, Director of Crossroads Community Services,
at the eleven o'clock service, January 2, 2011: The Second Sunday after Christmas.
Based on Jeremiah 31:7-14 and Matthew 2:1-12.*

The history of the Christian Church could be described as a series of not completely accurate attempts to understand and then relate the story of Jesus to others. One example of the difficulty involved comes from the 1979 Monty Python movie, *The Life of Brian*. One of the central thematic jokes in the movie comes from the idea that people in the time of Jesus might have heard things wrong. So that “blessed are the peacemakers” is heard and related to others as “blessed are the cheese makers.”

Some of the funniest inaccurate attempts to understand the story of Jesus and relate the story to others are attempts by children to make sense out of the Christmas story. For example, have you heard the story about the phrase “round yon virgin mother and child” from the hymn *Silent Night*? After asking children to draw a picture of the Nativity, the Sunday school teacher was not surprised to see that one child had drawn a stable, a baby with a halo, a mommy, a daddy, and some animals. But then, off to the side, was a very plump figure of a boy. “Who could this be?” she asked. And the child responds with all the certainty of those who take stories literally, “That is round John Virgin, of course.”

I have had my own not completely accurate attempts to understand and relate the story of Jesus. One Sunday my mother asked what we had learned in Sunday school. I explained that we had learned about those three guys. She asked which three guys and I said the three wise guys. Containing her amusement my mother asked which three wise guys. I rolled my eyes and responded that she knew which wise guys: Frankenstein, Murray, and Gold.

In my inaccurate attempt to understand and relate the story, I had confused the gifts with the givers. Gifts are important in the Christmas story. I am not speaking as an economist who is trying to support the economy by encouraging people to go out and spend more money on gifts. And I am not speaking as one who would like you to give a specific gift to me or to the church, although that would be nice.

Gifts are important in the Christmas story because in the end the Christmas story is a story about God giving away the gift of God's self to humanity: God coming to live among us as a human being. Which is to say God living selflessly. Gift-giving, when done well, is an art. A really good gift, an artful gift, says something important about who the giver is and who the giver perceives the receiver to be.

The story of God giving away the gift of God's self to humanity seems to me to be the essential Christian story for two reasons. First, it is a story about the nature of God, to give gifts. Almost every Sunday we are reminded that all of life is a gift. If that is indeed true—and I believe that it is—then it is a gift given by God. And the story of God giving away the gift of God's self is important because it establishes that fact that God is the giver.

In addition this story is important because it tells us something about who God perceives us to be. This story, the story of God's living among us selflessly, is important because it exemplifies the type of life that Jesus taught us that we are to live. We are called to give the gift of ourselves to each other in order to build up of the kingdom of God. (Note to self: we are called to give the gift of ourselves to each other to build up the realm of God, not to

enable insanity, to make other people happy, or make people like us.) Jesus teaches us to give of ourselves in order to build up the kingdom of God. We are called upon to be givers. One could say that God gives the gift of God's own self to humanity, becoming human to teach us that we are capable of becoming givers, capable of becoming divine.

When I was in high school I attended St. David's Episcopal Church in Bethel Park, a suburb south of Pittsburgh, PA. Each year on the twelfth night of Christmas, January sixth—also known as the feast of the Epiphany, the day the Church celebrates the coming of the Wise Men—the people of St. David's celebrated with a spaghetti supper and by building a large bonfire fueled by the dried up Christmas greens and trees. That fire, which was always taller than I was, the warmth it generated on a cold winter night, the community which passed the light of the fire from one person to another—lighting candles and walking into the church singing *We Three Kings*—still remind me that the light and warmth come to us as a gift. We are called to share the gift of light and warmth with others.

The prophet Jeremiah describes God calling together a great company, which includes the blind and the lame, those with child, and those in labor. He is leading them by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they will not stumble. Mourning is being turned into joy and all shall be merry. Jesus invites us to join God in this important work.

So Frankenstein, Murray, and Gold are not a new law firm but a reminder that gifts are important. Gifts are important because we are important. We are gifts and we are called to give the gift of ourselves to others that they may recognize that they too are gifts. And the light will continue to spread.

Which is to say that all of life is a gift and it is time to start re-gifting.

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