

“The Gift that Keeps on Giving”
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By now most of us know about “re-gifting”. It means the giving to someone else a gift we’ve previously received ourselves and either couldn’t use or didn’t want. It’s become so common that we hear on TV and radio how we can “re-gift” appropriately. I guess you could say these gifts keep on giving since it saves the giver the time and expense of shopping for something new. And although re-gifting can be a cheapskate’s way of fulfilling family or social obligation, re-gifting is a great means of recycling gifts that may be very meaningful to the people receiving them.

Today’s gospel text is the lectionary reading for epiphany. Epiphany ends our twelve days of Christmas with the celebration of the magi who travel the long journey to visit the Christ child. They bring gifts--gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Much has been made of the significance of these gifts--the gold representing the gold of kings, the frankincense representing the incense burned in the holy of holy by the high priest, and myrrh--the ointment for burial, perhaps hinting at an event that will happen much later in Jesus’ life.

The magi are those mysterious, wise, astrologers whose roles in Christmas pageants are sought by volunteer actors almost as much as the role of Joseph or Mary. Who wouldn’t want to be a wise person, or as my girls use to say, “one of those wise guys.” For them were reserved the most elaborate costumes and those beautifully decorated gifts they placed carefully before the manger scene. But what does Matthew want us to get from this story of the magi that of all the gospels only he tells of the birth of the worshiped Christ child?

By definition an epiphany is an appearance of the Holy. Today we talk about epiphanies, like “I had an epiphany,” quite loosely as any particular, perhaps startling insight, but a true epiphany is God’s revelation to humankind.

Matthew’s telling of the birth story intends to make an important point, and that is that these magi represent people outside the Jewish faith, who nonetheless, recognize God’s epiphany born and lying in a manger. Matthew is giving the Jews a “slap on the wrist” and saying, “look, the Jewish establishment may not have recognized the baby Jesus as God’s epiphany, but these foreigners did!” And in fact, we don’t read of any Jewish high priest coming to worship baby Jesus! They were blinded by a religious institution that they had built up for their own purposes, a religious institution that supported them and gave them prestige in the community. They were blinded by the light of their own glory.

So Matthew makes the point that the Gentiles, those not part of the “in-group”, those outside the establishment, had the wisdom to recognize and worship and even give gifts to God’s epiphany made known in baby Jesus. The magi were guided by a bright star which in ancient times was associated with the birth of a king.

Recently, people have researched why this star was so bright and even speculated that a rare alignment of planets produced a particularly bright glow in the sky and perhaps this is so. But our resident astronomer, Tom, discounts the importance if not the science of this idea. The point is that this light was a sign that the foreigners, the magi, the gentiles knew as a sign of an epiphany. A king had been born. And these folks, though outside the Jewish faith, had open hearts to see what shown brightly from the heavens.

There’s a lesson in this text about in-groups and out-groups. You’d think the Jews, the “in-group” to whom Matthew is writing, who kept awaiting the Messiah would get God’s epiphany in Jesus right away, but they don’t. You’d think us Christians would naturally know

and understand God's epiphanies to us, but sometimes we don't. Especially when we as Christians become part of the "in group," the establishment, we may be blinded by our own particular form of God's revelation rather than being open to the fact that God's revelation can be made known even to foreigners outside the Christian community.

I remember as a small child about seven or eight riding in the back of my family's car in Springfield, Missouri, and I was almost in tears. I was thinking that one day if I were ever rich I'd spend all my money on big campaigns, like those of Billy Graham, all over the world to teach and preach the foreigners about Christianity. In my childhood sensibilities, it broke my heart to think that the majority of the world was going to hell because they hadn't had a chance to even hear the Christian message that I'd been taught. I also remember much later the great relief in my soul when I finally realized that God might reveal God's self in any way God chooses, even if it was an epiphany that was different than the one I knew.

We don't know what happened to the magi. The scripture doesn't tell us that they became missionaries to their own people demanding that their people adopt a new religion called Christianity. We do know that they recognized the Holy in this child, they worshiped a newborn king, and like many Gentiles who would come after them, all that this child taught and lived and revealed to the world of God was for them true.

Tom and I have a friend who lives in Upland who was born in a foreign land. Some of you have met him. His name is Ardi Rashidi and he is from a place in the world that we've learned more about in recent years. Ardi is Kurdish and was born into the ruling family of Kurds living in what is called Kurdistan--part of the territory the Allies after WWI decided would be incorporated within the boundaries of Iran and Iraq. Ardi is now a U.S. citizen and married to Wendy, also a friend of ours, who is a physician in Upland. It is a reasonable assumption that the magi, those ancient astrologers who studied the heavens, came from Ardi's homeland.

Ardi honors his religion called Yaresan, a religion that calls itself "Truth Worshipers who cherish the sacred gifts of Life, Knowledge, Understanding, peace, Freedom, Prosperity and Love for all people of the world." Ardi attends a United Church of Christ because he is open to God's epiphany taking many forms; and because the United Church of Christ also is open to God's ability to reveal God's self however God may choose to do so. While the UCC is a Christian faith and we know Jesus as the revelation of God in the world, we try not to be presumptuous enough to say, "Wait a minute, God, that's the only form of epiphany we're going to accept from you!"

As a way to demonstrate his faith, Ardi, has created this solid gold coin, which has on one side of it the symbol of the Kurdish American Education Society and on the other the symbol of the United Church of Christ. Each Christmas he participates in a pageant in which he is dressed in his traditional regal attire of his native land and proceeds to give the Christ child in the pageant a coin like this one as a dedication to all newborn children who are the peacemakers of our future. This gift expresses the common desire and commitment to a future in which the vision of God that transcends the particular vision of any one institutional religion may find expression in this world of ours which is sorely in need of an Epiphany! This gold coin is a gift that keeps on giving because each year it can be a reminder of the power and the message of what Matthew describes as the visit of the Magi. Ardi's hope in minting this special coin was that it be "re-gifted" throughout UCC churches to remind us of our ties to ancient people of other faiths who, like us, have the same hopes and dreams and vision of peace and good will that is much more than any one "in-group's" vision, but is in reality God's vision, God's dream for all of God's creation. Tom and I want to "re-gift" this coin to this congregation. May it be a continuing symbol of the power and the glory of a child born long ago whose vision of the world we seek to worship still today.