

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Feast of the Epiphany Year C
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

Every inch of the family van is packed. Christmas presents with bright, shiny paper and fancy bows are stuffed between the suitcases, filling every possible space. The children's eyes are lit up brightly with anticipation of spending the holidays with their grandpa. Although they are still young, their minds and hearts are jam-packed with memories. They begin to giggle, then nearly collapse in laughter, almost rolling out of their car seats, when they recall their last visit, the jokes that were told, the silly games they played, and the joy they all felt. They could actually feel it in their bones: love made real in joy.

The children rehearse over and over again what they will say to their grandpa when they offer their gifts. George, the 5 year old, cannot wait to give him his handprint captured in clay in his kindergarten class. He knows his grandpa will hold his own much larger hand up next to his own, and marvel at how "they are almost the same size" and they'll all explode into laughter.

Tricia, now 12, is bursting with excitement for her grandpa to open her gift, a crocheted potholder, just like her grandma taught to make a few years ago, before she died. Tricia has ripped it out over and over again until she was sure it is just perfect. The colors of yarn are her grandfather's favorites and she knows he'll love it. She anticipates his smile and her own heart smiles broadly.

John, the middle child, has bought something with his own allowance for his grandfather: a box of Godiva chocolate, for he and his grandfather share a sweet tooth. He knows his grandpa will share it with him, and happiness awaits him.

Henry, the father, found a photograph of them all from last year and had it framed for his father, thinking it the perfect gift to rest on his dad's dresser in the nursing center, which his father now calls home. A lot has changed in his father's condition since their last family visit, a lot that his children don't really comprehend. Although his children's hearts are filled with anticipation and expectation, his own heart is filled with dread at what he may find. He tunes out the children's antics as he drives the distance in silence, determined to love whatever they all may find, for somehow he knows that, as his father has changed, he too will be changed. He feels unprepared to meet his father this Christmas. He fears all that he brings will be inadequate.

It was a star, not one in the heavens, but a brightness in their hearts that told them it was time to find their king, the one who brought them salvation in the form of presence, guidance, love, and a hope for a better future.

It was a long, arduous journey, not necessarily over mountains and desert roads, but a pilgrimage within for Henry, pushing through the mountains of fear and deserts of doubt within his own soul, as to who he might find.

It was a journey with a surprise ending, not necessarily like the Magi who found a king in a vulnerable toddler, but rather in finding a king in the shape of a crippled old man he may not have recognized, were it not for the holiness which resides in whatever form our bodies take.

It was a time when human touch spoke volumes of love, not of an adult wise person embracing the small hand of a child, but a child caressing the arthritic hand of a beloved grandfather.

The Magi and the family came to pay homage, to kneel down before where the holy resided, bearing gifts, which were an expression of their love.

The particular gifts offered by the Magi to the toddler king demonstrate that they knew who they would be meeting. They knew the true identity of the toddler king, for they brought gold, to indicate that Jesus was the King of kings. They brought frankincense to indicate Jesus was the great high priest of Israel and beyond, and they brought myrrh to indicate that Jesus's life would involve a sacrifice of love, for myrrh was the element used in embalming. They knew Jesus would die for us.

The gifts the family brought were also symbols of their knowledge and love of the true identity of that man in the wheelchair. The family photograph speaks volumes of what matters most to the grandfather: his family members, the source of joy in his life. The crocheted potholder speaks to him of the legacy he and his wife have offered to those who will go beyond them, an assurance to him that who they have been actually matters. The box of chocolates are not just a sweet tooth indulgence, but a reminder to all that enjoying the gift of our life at all times is a value to hold onto. The gifts may have felt woefully inadequate as an expression of their love, and yet were exactly right. For their gifts show that they knew and are known, love and are loved, by the grandfather. It's an exchange of gifts that build up the relationship, and makes each part more holy.

This spontaneous desire to offer all that we are and have, even though it is often framed by the awareness that it may never be adequate, can come at milestone moments in our lives. I know when I held each of my two sons at their birth, my hearts' desire was to give them the world, and I dedicated my whole self to their well-being. I felt woefully inadequate, but I knew that only offering my whole self was appropriate, as they had just offered me the greatest gift of all. It was an exchange of love.

This feeling of an exchange of gifts can happen in extraordinary times, such as births, marriages, graduations, anniversaries, and death. And it can happen in ordinary times, when we sit together and share a meal, laugh uncontrollably with

each other, or sit in silence and meditate together. We often have a sense of wanting to offer the best of ourselves to one another, often feeling inadequate; yet knowing that this offering of love is exactly the right thing to do.

It is a good, right, and joyful thing to offer our gifts to each other, for what we do to and for each other is a reflection and extension of what we offer to the Christ within and among us.

Each time we exchange our gifts of love, showing that we know and are known by others, that we love and are loved by others, it is really our **hommage** to Christ. For the point of the incarnation, of God's coming among us in human form, is to embody the goodness of God. Gift giving is a way the invisible becomes visible; the way the hidden heart is made known. Gift giving is a way to communicate our spirit to someone we care about in such a way that our spirit flows into them and they are built up by our presence. It is a flow of love.

The Magi's coming to Jesus, like the family's coming to their grandpa, was neither arbitrary nor serendipitous, but destined. For this is why we have been created: to exchange our gifts of love. This is how we are God's people, reaching to be changed, moment by moment, into the image of Christ, by an exchange of gifts.

For each time we give to someone that which says, "I know you, I love you", whatever form love will take, whether in a smile, a caress, or in an honest conversation, they and we will be changed.

The Magi did not return the way they came, for after encountering Jesus, can we ever return to who we were?

As we meet Jesus today at the altar, let us bow our knees, or if standing, bend the knees of our heart, and offer our best selves, as inadequate as we may feel at times, to the King of kings. Let us offer to Jesus that which shows Jesus that we know and love him, that, with the assurance given to us through the Holy Communion, we are known and loved by him.

We may offer this morning our faith, hope, and joy, for this is what is given to us by Christ, and Christ will recognize us by these gifts.

We may also offer this morning the brokenness of our lives, the darker places in which we reside, the deep wounds we retain, or the shameful that exists within our souls. Christ knows us and is known by us in all of that as well, for Jesus knew and shared our tears, betrayals, and suffering, and made it all holy by his death.

Open your treasure chest this morning and offer the whole contents to Jesus, the Christ child in our midst.

Amen.

