

“The Gifts That We Bring”

Matthew 2:1-12

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Denbigh Presbyterian Church

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In the secular world Christmas is over. Summer clothing, including bathing suits, is already on the shelves in the stores. Valentine’s cards are in the racks. But, in the Christian church it’s still Christmas.

Even though we’re Christians at our house our decorations are put away and Christmas is “over,” with one exception. One lone nativity set remains – the one Dan’s mother made while they lived in Germany. It’s a ceramic set with the full cast of characters.

Recently, when our friends the Hunttons visited with us from Pittsburgh, Paul noted that his family had the same ceramic nativity set which his mother had also painted when he was a child. They, too, had the problem of one-eared sheep. Apparently the ceramic sheep ears were especially vulnerable to breakage. Paul said that sometime during his childhood one or more of his seven siblings had drawn on the interior of the crèche with crayons. His mother had solved the problem by cutting out a scenic picture of Washington State (where they lived) and pasting it on the inside of the crèche. It was better that Jesus have a view of Washington than crayon markings.

Paul and Dan also discovered that their mothers had been equally prepared for other problems with the nativity scenes. Both had made sure they had an extra Jesus on hand. I’m sure there’s a sermon in that some where, but I haven’t figured it out yet.

Like in most nativity scenes, the wise men and their camels (if you’re lucky enough to get more than one camel) are the best. I’ve always thought the wise men were the coolest parts to play in church

Christmas pageants, too, but where I come from only boys could play those parts. And, where I come from, my complaining about this discrimination against girls was looked upon as the first sign that I already had radical liberal leanings. My parents were already shaking their heads, concerned I'd do something really "out there" like become a minister.

Besides the fact that the wise men had the best costumes, I loved how they got to process down the church aisle and bring Baby Jesus exotic presents. I don't think I had any idea what frankincense and myrrh were, but they sounded like the most beautiful things you could give Jesus, along with gold. Except when my brothers played the parts of the wise men and made strange faces during the processional, I would become somewhat emotional at the thought of bringing presents to Jesus.

Today, I still feel something stir within me when I think about the fact that we have the opportunity to offer our gifts to Christ – and not just at Christmas. We don't have to be dressed in fancy clothes or come from exotic places. We don't have to purchase these gifts. On the one hand they cost us nothing; on the other they may cost us everything.

A family I know decided to make this Christmas different. They decided among themselves (parents, adult children and adult grandchildren) to give each other gifts which cost no more than \$5 each and were not entirely store bought. They stuck to this commitment and each of them thought of very creative things to make -- from personalized bird houses, to cookies, to homemade steak sauce to personalized garden stepping stones, to the ingredients for a favorite family soup. They found it to be the best Christmas ever. It didn't cost much money. It was a gift of self.

In another family, one grandmother's favorite gifts were the two poems her granddaughters had written and given her as a Christmas gift. It didn't cost money. It was a gift of self.

What do we give to the One – to Christ – who has everything? We give ourselves. We offer to Christ “all that we have, all that we are and all that we hope to be.” We offer Christ our faithfulness, our love and our humility.

But what does this look like in everyday life? It looks like worship. The wise men bowed down and worshipped the Christ child. This gift was more important than the gold, frankincense and myrrh. It looks like sacrificial service to others and risk-taking for the good of others. The wise men realized that Herod was using them. They took the risk of going home a different way, of not reporting to Herod where Jesus was. Giving ourselves to Christ is not always easy, simple or stress-free.

Giving ourselves to Christ looks like surrender and openness. It looks like humility – not having all the answers, admitting when we've taken the wrong road and ended up at the wrong place and starting over again and again.

Giving ourselves to Christ looks like love. It looks like offering ourselves as a gift to others. It looks like using our spiritual gifts for God's good purposes wherever we are. This love may take us to far-away places like it did the wise men, or it may take us to the house we live in. This love may take us places we'd rather not go, to experiences we'd rather not have. This love may bring us pain, yet this love will bring us life.

As a church, how do we give ourselves to Christ? What gifts do we bring to Christ? Some time ago I asked our session to ponder this scenario. The church is gone. The church building of DPC is gone. The

congregation of DPC is gone. Our ministries no longer exist in the Denbigh community. Imagine that the Newport News City Council asks the people of Denbigh (not former church members) to inscribe a monument erected on this property which speaks to what the church meant to the community. I asked the session members to write the inscription they would hope to read. Here are some of the inscriptions they wrote:

“A place where all could come when hungry, homeless, burdened with sorrows and find their needs met with love and compassion.”

“Here stood a legacy of love that stand to this day. The building and the people are gone. Their love never ends.”

“Outstretched hands, reaching into the community. Open ears, listening to our neighbors. Open eyes, looking for ways to share God’s love.”

“Denbigh Presbyterian Church always served as a beacon and testimony to the spirit of Christ in this community. A safe harbor for those in need of spiritual nourishment.”

“Because of Jesus, they cared about us.”

“Dedicated to a congregation of loving, faith-believing people who reached out to those in need and to people who would not have otherwise found Christ or a place to worship.”

“The church was a symbol that God lives today. The church showed its good works throughout the community. It was a vital working church, as members were seen participating and attending functions at the church.”

“This church and its people provided steadfast love and spiritual guidance to all those that entered its doors or participated in activities on its site. It loved this community and never closed its doors on those in need.”

Ponder that for a moment. What would you like that inscription to say about how this church – this faith community – affected the Denbigh Community?

I believe the answers to that question should shape our church’s vision for the future. I believe the answers to that question tell us what giving ourselves to Christ looks like for us as a church. I believe the answers to that question help us know what it looks like for Denbigh Presbyterian Church to bring its gifts to the Christ Child.

May we as individuals and as the church bring our gifts to Christ today and everyday.