

C Epiphany 1.6.19

Matthew 2:1-12

Focus Statement: Grace is a free gift

A couple of years ago, my cousin found a letter my father had written to my great aunt when he was ten or eleven. The letter read: "Dear Aunt Lee. Mom said I have to write you a thank you note to thank you for letting me come visit this summer. I told mom that you would not be expecting a note from me, because you know I don't write letters. But mom said I have to write a letter anyway. Love, Glen."

First off, let me say that hearing this letter from my father at ten made me understand my brother a whole lot better. But more to the point, while I think my grandmother was absolutely right in enforcing a thank-you note writing policy, I myself am a bit proponent of the thank you note, as it is just good manners, I have to admit my father also has a bit of a point. Writing a thank you note is good manners, but expecting a thank you note for a gift given implies there is a string attached to the gift. Like, I'm giving you this, and here's what you owe me in return.

Thank you notes are a bit of an innocuous string, and again, I am a big proponent of the thank you note. Children listening, you should definitely write your grandparents, aunts and uncles, whoever, thank you notes. It's good manners. But gifts can come with other, more constricting strings. Strings that make us question if we should really accept the gift, if it is even a gift at all. Most non-profits actually have written into their donation policy that they have the right to refuse a gift if it restricts or doesn't fit their mission. Imagine, for example, if someone gave us a million dollars to start an Icelandic language learning center

in the Post Addition. Or left us a house with one hundred thousand owed in back taxes. Yeah, it's a gift, but neither help our mission. What are the youth of Post going to do with Icelandic as a second language? Every Icelander I've ever met, and there are only 300,000 of them to begin with, speaks fluent English. And a house mired in that much debt could destroy us.

Working in volunteer and donations at the women's shelter before seminary, I admit I got more than a little jaded about this sort of self-satisfying so-called "gift giving." Especially around this time of year. I'd get calls from companies wanting to dump off baby formula or children's things to get the tax credit, who would then get mad at me when I explained to them that we were not a family shelter, and really had no use for their baby formula. My least favorite was the one and done volunteers who would call the day before Thanksgiving or Christmas wanting to "serve the homeless," who would then yell at me when I patiently explained that we were set for the holiday, but could really use their help in January. I was always polite, but in my head I thought, "who do you want to serve here? Our women, who need to eat every day, or your own ego for doing the "great deed" of "giving up your holiday" to "help" those "less fortunate." It's a sermon so you can't see the air-quotes around all those words but trust me, they're there.

OK, off my soapbox. The point is, some gifts have strings attached. And in the first century, all gifts had strings attached. Gifts were a means of ensuring compliance or angling for support. A first century peasant might give gifts to a ruler to demonstrate their loyalty, beg for mercy, or ask a favor. And in the unlikely event that a higher status person gave a gift to

a lower status person, that gift almost certainly came with the expectation of there now being a debt of gratitude owed, in the form of service or loyalty. In first century gift giving, there truly was no such thing as a free lunch.

Which is what makes this story from the Gospel of Matthew all the more extraordinary. Because in this story we have wise men from the east bringing gifts to a newborn peasant child. And not just any gifts, but gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold is, of course, gold. Frankincense literally translates to “high-quality incense,” *franc* being an Old French word for “noble” or “pure.” And myrrh, along with frankincense, was used as a holy anointing oil to bless priests, kings, and the Temple itself. These gifts are not a meat pie; they are seriously expensive items, items that could only be befitting a powerful king. We don’t hear Mary and Joseph’s response to these gifts, but one must wonder if they were filled at first as much with dread as with gratitude. What could these wealthy strangers want in return for such exorbitant offerings?

And then, just as unexpectedly as they’d come, the wise men left. There was no expectation of repayment, no on-going obligation of loyalty. These were gifts, freely given and received in response to love. What the wise men do here is turn gift-giving on its head, ushering in one of the first examples of what Mary sung about in the Magnificat, of the rulers being brought down and the lowly lifted up, of the hungry being filled and the rich sent away empty. What we see in this story is the rich bringing gifts to the poor and going away empty-handed and joyful. No exchange of loyalty, no expectation of gratitude. Mary and

Joseph couldn't have even written a thank you note if they'd wanted to, how do you address a letter to "wandering Zoroastrian priests following stars."

We talk a lot in our tradition about grace, how grace is a gift that God gives to us, that we could never earn or deserve, and friends, the gifts of the Magi are the kind of gifts that grace is. In this story we see just the first glimmering example of what the new world birthed in a manger will be. Grace is God's unconditional yes to us. It is the promise that we are unequivocally loved and claimed and treasured by God. That the Creator of the universe, the one who formed the very stars in the sky, slipped into skin, came into this world to be with us, and died on a cross for us, so that even death itself could not separate us from God. God did all this with no expectation of loyalty, no debt of gratitude, no requirement of repayment. Grace is pure gift; nothing expected or asked for in exchange, which is good because nothing we have to give could ever measure up. Like Mary and Joseph, we may feel unsure at first when we realize the enormity of the gift, the vast outreach of the love God has for us, we might wonder what we owe in return. But I encourage you, hard as it is, to remember that that is the wrong question. Rather than trying to earn it or deserve it, all that God asks of us is that we lean into this love. Because love this grand, this vast, changes us. Trying to earn love or deserve it keeps us focused on ourselves, on our own actions, and it holds us back. But if we instead, like the wise men, find ourselves swept up in the wonder of this gift, we will discover, without even knowing it, that we are living even more fully out of the grace we have received.

Dear friends in Christ, you are beloved of God. Not because of who you are, not because of what you've done, but simply because of who God is. God gives you this love because God loves you. Don't worry about understanding it, trusting it, or even believing it. Instead, I invite you to just lean into the promise of this love. For it will transform you. It already is. Amen.