

## Out of the Box Gifts

Sterling UMC  
December 18, 2011  
Luke 1:26-38

The weeks and days before Christmas have dwindled down to hours. We are busy buying those last-minute gifts, encountering the congested streets and jam-packed stores. Retailers of all sorts are frantically slashing prices on their merchandise to entice consumers to buy more stuff, to get more goodies. Here are some sample ads collected in one week:

\*Wal-Mart wants us to buy more so we will “live better.” (Unless, of course, we get pepper sprayed or trampled to death buying more).

\*A TV commercial Mom says she wants to see her kids doing the “present dance”—hyper children ripping and tearing and prancing around piles and piles of dismembered packages.

\*Sears proclaims our purchases will fulfill all the “dreams” of others.

\*A television commercial promises: “Change your TV . . . Change your life.”

But has it ever struck you as odd that we celebrate Jesus’ birthday by giving presents to ourselves? If it’s Jesus’ birthday, why isn’t he getting the presents? Isn’t the one who is celebrating the birthday the one who is supposed to get the gifts?

Maybe we change that rule at Christmas because we don’t want to have to think about what kind of presents Jesus would like. What would most please Jesus to get for Christmas?

Luke’s birth annunciation text this week doesn’t tell us what kind of gift Jesus would like to get from us. But it does reveal the absolute uniqueness, the unprecedented greatness of this child. This “Son of the Most High,” the one who will be given “the throne of his ancestor David,” the one whose miraculous conception makes him “holy” and the “Son of God,” is certainly to receive the most extravagant, the most wondrous, the most heavenly gifts possible.

Do you really think a new cell phone, or a flat screen TV, fits that bill?

The other focus in Luke’s narrative emphasizes the ordinariness of Mary. She lives in such a dumpy little village Luke feels the need to give his readers geographical directions describing its location. The typical age at which a girl would be “betrothed” to a man was between twelve and fourteen. This barely teenage girl, still living under her father’s roof until her marriage ceremony, epitomized insignificance. Her status in that first-century world was zero.

Yet Mary was the one chosen to receive this miraculous child through the wholly unmerited grace of God. Luke's text serves to remind us that we are all Marys. We have all been miraculously, graciously chosen to be recipients of the gift of the Christ child. When you think about that one thought, shouldn't our response to this gift be, not one of "What else can we get for Christmas?" but one of "What can we give back?"

When the Magi (the "Three Kings") visited the infant Jesus, they brought gifts that were far from "child friendly." No blankets or booties, no trinkets or toys. The Magi brought extraordinarily expensive, lavish gifts — gifts fit for a king. Gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gold we still know about. In fact judging by the fact that there are many places where you can take your old, broken and worn out gold jewelry and sell it for cash it seems that gold is as valuable as ever.

But the other two gifts, myrrh and frankincense, are not part of our usual daily experience. For one thing myrrh was worth up to five times its weight in gold, while frankincense was valued at just about its own weight in gold. Myrrh and frankincense are both resins — solidified tree saps "milked" from the trunk of their respective plants. Both were harvested for their scent and for other restorative properties. In other words, both were used in "aromatherapy" and in medicinal therapy. Both were medicines you actually ingested.

The "tell", the thing that reveals the inner nature of both myrrh and frankincense, is that both of these elements must be released in order to be experienced. They were both either burned or ingested in order for their healing properties to be put into practice. Although frankincense and myrrh were far more than "perfumes" in the first century, it still holds true today that aromatics which are kept bottled up, unused, "saved," are useless. The primary function of an aromatic is to disperse into the air. Keeping it bottled up, or as was the case with the chunky, resinous myrrh and frankincense, keeping it boxed up, negates all its value.

Even in these calamitous economic times, we all know that keeping gold or any other valuable in a box is NOT the best way to maximize its value.

The Magi's extravagant gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense were only valuable, only meaningful, when they were let out into the world.

\*Gold is only good when it provides food, shelter, and sustenance for the family holding it. The fate of the miserable miser is the inspiration for many classic fables and stories.

\*Frankincense resin, the harvested drops called "tears," were only useful when "shed" or when burned to release their restorative scent. Frankincense was also ingested in the ancient world, a practice validated by a recent Johns Hopkins/Hebrew University study, which found the pain of osteoarthritis greatly reduced by the ingestion of frankincense.

\*Myrrh does its best work only when “released.” While other resinous materials melt down and become a fast-evaporating liquid when burned, myrrh actually “blooms.” When burned, myrrh expands both its physical and olfactory impact. Releasing myrrh through burning brings added power and pungency to this aromatic gem.

The Magi did not give the baby Jesus extravagant, expensive gifts so that they could remain in their boxes, holed up and hoarded. Not one of these gifts were any good in their box. The only thing these boxes, these “cargo-containers,” were good for was to transport these first Christmas gifts from point “A” to point “B.”

The boxes of gold, frankincense, and myrrh the baby Jesus received were not the intended presents. The content of those boxes including the purchasing power of the gold, the healing power of the frankincense, the restorative abilities of the myrrh, these all needed to be released in order to be fully received.

Gifts that only have worth “out of the box” are the kind of gifts we should be offering this Christmas season. For only “out of the box” presents are worthy of being given to the Christ child.

If this is Jesus’ birthday, and we should be giving presents to him, what kind of “out of the box” presents should we be giving him?

We know the kind of gifts that Jesus would like to receive, no matter how hard we try to pretend we don’t. We know. We know. What are these gifts? They are the gifts of ourselves. The apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 12:1, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” That’s the best give that we can give to the Lord. Give him our hearts. I love the way the old carol puts it,

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

That’s an outside the box gift. Will you do that? Are you willing to do that? I have three suggestions that I would like for you to consider for how we can do this:

The Gold Gift of Love:

Call it the Golden Rule, the Platinum Rule, or the Titanium Rule, we name it after a precious metal because of its undisputed value. To love, to love others even as we have been loved and valued, to love others as Christ has loved us, to love even our enemies, this is the gift of gold we can give each year to the Christ child. Perhaps a better name for the church might be “LOVE, INC.”

The Myrrh Gift of Compassionate Care for Creation:

The compassionate care that “blossoms” and expands until it fills the whole earth is the myrrh gift. Even as the cycle of creation involves life and death, myrrh was used as a life-giving force and as a burial unguent. Care for newborn life, honor in death, Christ’s saving presence in both life and death is found in the pungency of myrrh.

The Frankincense Gift of Joy to the World:

The mission of Jesus, the message of Christmas, is all about joy put into action. Feeding the hungry, offering liberation to prisoners, healing to all who suffer, that was the gift of the Christ child. Whenever we participate in any of those activities, we are wafting the fragrance of frankincense around the world.

I shall never forget the story of Christmas pasts told by an African-American employee at United Theological Seminary library in Dayton, Ohio. When she was a child, her parents allowed all the presents under the tree to be opened. But the children could only pick one to keep. They then had to give to those more needy than themselves the other presents, and they had to give them personally. It wasn’t as if they themselves weren’t needy. But every Christmas they were reminded that they were here not just to provide for themselves, but to care for those around them who were more in need than they were. They literally had to take those presents out of the box, and set them free to do their work in the world.

“It’s Not Your Birthday” is a Christmas ministry sponsored by Michael Slaughter and Ginghamburg United Methodist Church (Tipp City, Ohio). The deal is this: for every dollar you spend on Christmas for yourself, you give a dollar for the church’s ministry in Darfur. In a few short years, in this blue-collar part of Ohio, this one church has raised 3 million dollars for Darfur.

What child doesn’t like to play in boxes? In fact, lots of times the boxes are more fun than what came in them. But, as Paul reminded first-century disciples, with the gift of salvation comes the journey of sanctification, where we are called to “put away childish things.” At Christmas it is so easy to get sucked into the “childishness” of the season. Not childish innocence, not childish openness, which are good things, but the childish sense of entitlement, the “I give a gift, I get a gift” boxy equation that becomes an expectation.

Let’s get outside that box this Christmas. And let’s give gifts that only work outside the box.

Gifts with the purchasing power of gold that can provide sustenance and shelter for the hungry and needy.

Gifts with the healing power of frankincense that can provide wellness and wholeness and joy for the sick and diseased of the world.

Gifts with the restorative abilities of myrrh that can release God's resurrection energies on new life and on a dying person or planet.

Let's give out of the box gifts this Christmas. Gifts that only come to life when taken out and set free. Gifts that bloom and blossom. Gifts that are empowered when pungent. Gifts that are only useful when used.

Remember: we are all Marys — undeservedly gifted by God's grace; made for the mission of birthing Christ in our world; needing to give back all we possibly can in thankfulness for that miraculous gift, Emmanuel, God with us.

Presents become Presence only Out of the box.