

## “Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh”

Matthew 2:1-12

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January 8, 2017

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Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the three best commodities available to the Magi as they imagined searching for and finding God’s Messiah. They had seen the star in the East. They understood that God was doing something new. Following the star and locating the sovereign of the universe became their highest priority. Anticipating a moment of intense joy, they thought to bring along their best things as gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Various preachers have gone into great detail describing how each of the gifts is a symbol for various parts of Jesus’ life. But, for me, it is enough to realize that the gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the very best that they had to give.

Thus, the Magi set a very high standard when it comes to bringing gifts to Christ. Unwittingly, they push us to ask ourselves: ‘what are MY best things?’ What do I have to offer? What could I present to God that would make it clear I am grateful for my life and for all the loves in my life? What’s MY gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

This becomes a very personal question and must be answered very personally. I am glad to give you my own answer, but everyone here needs to figure this out on your own. My best thing is my passion for inclusion. I believe I bring this with me to Church Council meetings, to Youth-in-Mission meetings, to the work I do beyond the walls of the church. Being inclusive in my thinking is one of my gifts to God. This is why I serve as a trustee of the Sioux YMCA. Lakota people have historically been excluded from the decision making arena. Being a trustee of the Y helps me correct that injustice.

This is why I do Inter-Faith work at the mosque in Berlin. Muslim people are often looked upon as outsiders. By showing up there and by offering the right hand of welcome, I help ease that fear that compromises their joy.

This is why I lead mission trips to Malawi. Malawi is often labeled as a third world nation, economically speaking; but I see it as a first-world nation, spiritually speaking. By taking small groups for visits, I try to help us to see that people on that continent have something to teach us about the things that truly matter.

I try to notice who is absent from the table, then try to bring that missing person to a seat at the table. When Jesus called the first twelve disciples, he did so with an eye on diversity. Those disciples weren't all wealthy landowners or persons with power or people from the same social class. He gathered in fishermen and farmers and tax collectors; hourly wage earners and net-menders; literate and not-so-literate, religious and not-so-religious. So, I take him as my model. Whenever I exercise this passion for inclusion, I feel I am presenting to God one of the best things I have.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century artist, Pablo Picasso, once said, "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." Picasso and the three Magi would have gotten along well. They each knew what it means to find your passion, and then to give it away!

I want to introduce you to my in-laws, Gus and Mildred Kirsch. Gus was a draftsman and Mildred a middle school English teacher. They were active in their Lutheran Church and made tithing a spiritual priority. You might say they were passionate about tithing; that it was their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In 1966, Gus suffered a major stroke.

Two hospitalizations and many therapists and all kinds of medications ran up a sizeable medical bill. This got the attention and the suspicion of the Internal Revenue Service who decided to audit them. The auditor came out to the house, looked over every check stub, every receipt, every medical expense, every source of income, and every charitable gift. Then, he declared in an accusatory tone to my in-laws, 'Looks like you're giving ten percent of your money away!' To this, Mildred replied, "Don't you tithe to your church?" There was a silence. Then the IRS agent closed his briefcase, excused himself, and left their home, never to return again.

I don't know if Gus and Mildred were acquainted with Pablo Picasso, but I do know they had found their gift; it was a gift for generosity; and they shared that gift with their church. By the time of their deaths, they had completed their life purpose: to be outrageously generous with the family checkbook.

The gifts of the Magi cause us to reflect on and identify what is my one best thing that I can bring to Christ? What is the one gift I've been given that I can surrender to God as a sign of my gratitude?

In 1969, if you were in the Peace Corps in Malawi, you were either in Secondary Education or you were in Community Health. Jack Allison was in Community Health. His story illuminates the Magi's gift of gold, frankincense, and myrrh as well as any story I know.

Jack was passionate about community health, but he was equally passionate about rock and roll music. He showed up in that central African nation with his stethoscope and his electric guitar. He soon found a way to merge the two passions and to use them to do God's work. He noticed the staggering degree of childhood malnutrition. Children weren't getting enough protein. Yet, peanuts were grown in nearly every village.

So, he wrote this rock and roll song in Chichewa Language called *Ufa WaNtedza*. Translated, the song teaches: “Mothers: add peanut flour to your baby’s porridge.” The song caught on. It was played on the national radio station. Soon, everyone in Malawi was singing and dancing to *Ufa WaNtedza*. AND...babies were growing healthier. The infant mortality rate plunged.

That song was of course followed by many others: *Chiwayway*: Chase rabid dogs from the village. *Chimbudzi*: Wash hands when coming from the latrine. *Chipanda*: Wipe the flies from your babies eyes. On and on they went: health messages with a rock and roll beat. I think of Jack as one of the Magi. I think he saw the star in the East. His camel was a jet plane. I think of his guitar and his stethoscope as his gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Magi of old and the Magi of today invite us; no; challenge us to identify what constitutes our gold, frankincense, and myrrh; and then to deliver that gift to the Christ. For it is when the gift is given that the purpose of life is fulfilled.

This is what I needed to say this morning, in the greatest of hope.  
Amen.