

GIFTS FOR A KING(DOM): 3. MYRRH

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Galatians 5:1, 13-25

When I was young, my father served in the Alabama legislature for twelve years. Consequently, my parents were involved in state and local politics. And I remember one occasion when a candidate for president came through my hometown, Mobile, Alabama, for a day of campaigning and fundraising. My parents were involved with the organizing of this event, and at the end of the day, when the candidate had departed, my parents returned home with gifts. These weren't gifts from the candidate, but they were gifts to the candidate—gifts given by local residents as a sign of their homage to this candidate.

The gifts themselves were nothing special. They were mostly handmade. There was a knitted cap with an American flag design. There was a model of the White House made of popsicle sticks and buttons. The nicest item was a large wooden plaque carved into the shape of the United States. I think it was supposed to be a coffee table.

My parents had ended up with these items because the candidate's staff had dumped them saying that they simply didn't have room for this stuff on the plane. My folks brought these items home and they bounced around our house for years because none of us had the heart to just throw them away.

This moment from my youth made an impression on me that has always kept me interested in the subject of presidential gifts.

Presidents, it turns out, receive a lot of gifts. These gifts must be classified as being domestic or foreign. Domestic gifts come from Americans and foreign gifts come from heads of state and visiting dignitaries.

All domestic gifts, no matter how small, must be logged by the White House Gift Unit and submitted to the National Archives. Gifts from foreign officials are managed by the State Department. All gifts are regulated by the Foreign Gifts And Decorations Act of 1966 as well as the Presidential Records Act of 1978. All gifts must be disclosed under the Ethics In Government Act of 1978. The entire subject of presidential gifts is extraordinarily complex.

Nonetheless, since the beginning of our republic, presidents have been the recipients of some wonderful and amazing gifts. The most well-known of these might be the desk given by Queen Victoria in 1880 to Rutherford B. Hayes. This ornate desk was carved from the timbers of the British ship HMS Resolute. The desk is known as the Resolute Desk and is a fixture in the Oval Office.

A lot of presidential gifts are truly bizarre. Theodore Roosevelt received a zebra from Ethiopia. Richard Nixon was given a panda from the Chinese. George W. Bush was gifted 300 pounds of raw lamb meat from the president of Argentina. Thomas Jefferson was given a block of cheese which weighed 1235 pounds. It was a gift from the Republican Baptists of Cheshire, Massachusetts. Inscribed on the cheese were the words "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." Richard Nixon was given a portrait of himself that had been carved on a grain of rice. The gift came with a magnifying glass, thankfully. Teddy Roosevelt was given a coyote which he allegedly allowed to roam the White House grounds. Ronald Reagan was gifted a number of saddles. He was gifted his portrait which had been created with 10,000 jelly beans. You can view this portrait at his library in California. It's quite tasty.

I've been thinking of gifts because this has been the focus of my sermon series during Epiphany. I've been exploring those gifts brought by the wise men to the baby Jesus.

The wise men, or magi, were most likely Zoroastrian priests or astrologers who interpreted in the movement of the stars that a king had been born to the Jewish people. They traveled to Jerusalem and began inquiring about this new king. They wished to pay him homage. Their inquiries in Jerusalem drew the attention of King Herod who summoned them to the palace. Herod was the less-than-legitimate king of Judea having been placed on the throne by the Romans. The last thing Herod wanted was the appearance of a legitimate Jewish king.

Herod informs the magi that according to prophecy the child they are seeking should have been born in the village of Bethlehem. Herod sends the magis towards that village with instructions to return to him after they have located the child. Herod tells them that he desires to honor the child himself. We know, however, that his intentions were far more nefarious.

The magi travel to Bethlehem, and they locate this child in a home along with Mary and Joseph. They pay him homage and they present him with gifts—gifts of gold, frankincense,, and myrrh.

The central question of this sermon series revolves around these three gifts. If we, as Christians, recognize Jesus as Christ our King, then what gifts do we bring to him? Are our gifts truly fit for a king?

To better understand this question, I have considered what each of these gifts might represent.

The gift of gold would seem to represent money. And the question here is, do we share our wealth in the name of our faith? Do we use our money to promote the work of God's kingdom in this world? Are we generous to those in need? Do we joyfully support our church? Do we give our money in a manner fit for a king?

The second gift is frankincense. Frankincense is a costly aromatic. Some believe it to have medicinal properties. Frankincense is found in the resin of a certain tree that grows only in the Arabian Peninsula. In Jesus' day, frankincense was more valuable than gold. It was used as incense in the temple in Jerusalem. When one entered that great temple, they would encounter its sweet fragrance. For this reason, the frankincense of the magis represents our worship. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: Do we give ourselves to worship in such a way that is fit for a king? Do we worship with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do we give all of ourselves to God in our worship?

The third gift of the magi is myrrh. Myrrh is similar to frankincense in that it is an aromatic derived from a tree and is believed to have medicinal properties. While frankincense comes from the boswellia tree, myrrh comes from the commiphora tree, which is actually a thorny bush. The commiphora tree grows only in a limited area on the Arabian Peninsula. Like frankincense, myrrh is a resin extracted from this plant. Myrrh is used as a perfume, as incense, and in medicine. Across ancient cultures, myrrh was often mixed with wine as a painkiller and psychotropic.

The medical uses for myrrh include its use as a healing salve, as an analgesic for toothaches, as a remedy for indigestion, ulcers, asthma, arthritis pain, and more. It was also used in the embalming process preparing bodies for burial.

In the Bible, we read about myrrh in Exodus where it is the main ingredient in holy anointing oil. In the book of Esther, we read about myrrh as a perfume. Lastly, at the crucifixion, while on the cross, Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh to help with the pain, but he refuses it.

In the context of the magi, the gift of myrrh, in addition to the gold and frankincense, represents a third way of honoring Christ—service. In Exodus, one of the purposes of that holy anointing oil made with myrrh was to anoint Aaron and his sons. Aaron was the brother of Moses. This oil was used to *consecrate them to serve God as priests*. Just as we lay hands on those ordained to serve, the myrrh oil was used to consecrate God's priests such as Aaron and his sons. Myrrh represents our serving our God.

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul addresses a congregation that has strayed. They have lost sight of their purpose as Christians. In this letter, Paul endeavors to remind them of their core commitment to Christ—a commitment found in the words of Deuteronomy. As Paul writes, *For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Paul is reminding the Galatians of what God calls us to do, that our central tenet is to love one another. Paul goes on to say that as Christians, we have two choices. We can choose to live by the flesh or to live by the Spirit.

What does it mean to “live by the flesh?” To answer this, Paul provides a lengthy list of vices that he calls *works of the flesh*. This list is by no means exhaustive. It is there to provide the people an idea of what it is like to live in the flesh. The flesh is selfish and self-centered; it is contentious and angry. The ways of the flesh are contrary to the ways of God’s kingdom.

On the other hand, living in the Spirit is different. Paul also outlines for us the fruit of the Spirit. And it is a wonderful list indeed. He writes, *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. As persons of faith, we should always strive to live in the Spirit.

But we know this is not easy. We know that within us there is a constant battle between our corrupted flesh and the transforming Spirit. It is only with this Spirit that we have a prayer of discovering God’s new realm. The path to that kingdom is paved with the love that we have for our neighbors and the ways in which we serve them.

In serving others, we should seek to emulate Christ who give his life for us. As we read in the gospels, *For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve* (Mark 10:45). Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus showed us how we should serve. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, befriended the outcast. The Christian life is a life of service.

I am proud of the many ways that each of you serve. I witness it every day in your acts of compassion to one another. I see it in the ways that you reach out to your neighbors. I see it in the acts of service organized in the name of FPC—Souper Bowl of Caring, Rise Against Hunger, Compassionate Hands, and more. You do all these things not to draw praise and recognition. You do it out of love for neighbor, out of love for Christ.

Paul's point to the Galatians is that when we serve, we become free. When we adopt that attitude of serving others then we are no longer slaves of our own flesh. We become free to live as God designed us. As Paul writes, *For freedom, Christ has set us free*.

We are to serve just as Christ served. In fact, he turned out to be the greatest example of how one can serve. He gave of himself on the cross so that others might live. As one scholar puts it, those who follow Christ “are a people whose actions are marked by the shape of the cross rather than their own selfish desires.”

And this is reflected in the gift of the magi, the gift of myrrh. Of its many qualities, myrrh was used in preparing a body for burial. When we serve in the name of Christ, we die to our old lives and are born to a new life.

I would like to end with this observation. The last thing we hear about the magi is that after bringing their gifts to the King, they return home. However, in a dream

they were warned not to return to Herod. If they had, they would have given him the location of the child. He would be grateful to them and likely shower them with gifts and adulation. It would have been good for them.

But they don't. They choose another way. They choose the way of the Spirit. They changed the world.