

ALL KINDS OF GIFT GIVING

Each Christmas I make sure I get together with some of my long-time friends from my first assignment as a priest. We are all a lot older now, most in their mid-70's or even 80 years old. It is fun to reminisce and to catch up with what has been going on in their lives the past year. Yesterday was the day and in the course of our conversation we spoke about gifts given and received over the years. I shared with them a story about my niece Karen whose birthday is Christmas Eve. She is married and has three daughters. Four years ago, a couple of years after my mom had died and her things divvied out among family members I was in what had been my mother's room and was just looking around. Against the wall was her Cedar Chest, A Hope Chest from her youth. It was painted a very drab brown and was anything but appealing. It was old. No one wanted it. And so, there it sat but for some reason as I looked at it a memory flashed into my mind. I remember that forty years ago there was a fashion about antiquing things, desks, chairs, hope chests. My mom got a bit swept up in that and she began to antique things, a desk, her Hope Chest, my brother when he sat in one place for too long and so forth. What struck me was that I remembered that the Cedar Chest had actually been a rather beautiful piece of handiwork and there was inlaid wood. It was just the beginning of summer and I lugged the Cedar Chest downstairs and out back in the Rectory and decided to see if it was going to be possible to restore it to its former glory.

Refinishing furniture is not one of my known gifts but by the end of the summer the original Cedar Chest with all its beautiful inlaid wood was back and on display. I was proud of the job and decided to give it to my niece who had spent a lot of time being baby sat by my mother over the years. I made arrangements to transport the finished product on Christmas Eve and unveiled it at my niece's home. "Uncle Steve, it's beautiful. Where did you get it?" "It was grandmom's." "Our Grandmom's? Where was it?" "In her bedroom. It was that brown chest." "THIS was that? I can't believe it. Who refinished it?" "I did." "I didn't know you could do that." "Me neither."

As beautiful as the piece was however my niece was more struck by the fact that I would take the time to do this and to do it for her. The Cedar Chest wasn't the best gift. The gift of self—time, effort, dedication. All these spoke much more eloquently. And I think the same is true with the Magi and the gifts they brought with them to lay before the newborn King of the Jews—gold, frankincense and myrrh. But the greater gift was that they left their homes and their daily lives and set out looking. They persevered and never gave up. They did whatever it took to complete the mission, even enduring hardships and discomforts and being misled.

But the Magi's greatest gift is that they bow before the child and do him homage. What do you think they were expecting to find at the end of their journey? No palace. No entourage. No fine trappings. No Cedar Chests. Just a new mom and dad and a baby. I am sure there were many of the same in the countries they came from. But they gave of themselves. Their knowledge and their science led them but could only take them so far. And when they arrived at the place of the child it was not their learning but rather their faith and their humility that they lay before this little one. There came this point where they had to choose. Seeing what they saw and having encountered all they had encountered along the way they came to a point where they had to make a decision. Seeing—they believed. It always comes down to that. And their choosing to believe is their greater gift, more than the precious material gifts they presented.

Yesterday was the feast of Saint Gregory Nazianzen, one of the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers and a bishop theologian. Listen to his words about the gifts we give:

*“Let each one of us no matter what the walk of life or circumstances, offer to God all that he can on every occasion according to the measure of his capacity, according to the gift bestowed upon him, in order that by displaying virtue in all its forms we may secure all the heavenly abodes, reaping all that we have sown, or rather, storing up in God’s silos all that we have garnered*

*“Let one contribute his riches, another his abject poverty; one his zeal, another his appreciation of the zeal of another; one a commendable deed, another a perceptive thought; one a timely remark, another eloquent silence; one unimpeachable instruction and a way of life to match, another an open and receptive ear; one virginity that is pure and severs all contact with the world; another a marriage that is devout and in no way divorced from God; one feasting that is not tainted with pride; another feast tempered by restraint; one unbroken prayers and spiritual hymns, another the care of the poor. All of us our tears, all of us our purification, all of us our upliftment and a straining forward to what lies ahead.”*

While I was listening to that list it suddenly dawned on me that a great deal of our lives, if not all of our lives, is about giving gifts. It’s just that we don’t tend to think of it in those terms. Words or silence, eating or not eating, married or virginal, listening, helping, praying, crying, being enthusiastic, sharing, rejoicing. All these are gifts. We do them every day. We make them available every day. We make the gift of ourselves like the Magi did every day. And sometimes what we think we are giving as a gift is not the better gift at all as I learned with my gift to my niece a couple of Christmases back.

And at the end of Matthew’s Gospel in the story about the judgment of the sheep and the goats where we hear the great question: “Lord when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or a stranger or sick or in prison and tend to your needs (and give of ourselves)?” “I tell you as often as you did it for one of these, the least of my people, you did it for me.” My friends we have to look at our lives and our living with new eyes today. We have to learn how to see the manifold gifts we give to others, all day long, every day. Because that is how God sees things. And that is how we imitate our God in making the gift of ourselves. The Magi remind us that all that we do is for the Lord. We lay our lives—our gift—before him and in this Eucharist each week we do him homage as the Magi did 2000 years ago.