

Wise Enough to Give

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

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Holy Communion
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Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

“Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” -- Matthew 12:11

A few nights ago, a group of four guys – Frank Yusko, Cliff Kowall, Rick Lorentz, and I – were standing in Frank and Gail’s kitchen discussing happiness. I don’t know how common it is at parties for four guys to stand around with a diet soda, a couple bottles of beer, and a glass of wine discussing happiness or any other great topic, but that’s what we were doing, and for this group, at least, it seemed perfectly natural. It reminded me of those late-night – and sometimes all-night – discussions we used to have in college, and what an unrepeatable luxury we thought those nights were. We were, like all college students, partly right and partly wrong. We didn’t realize how the years would decrease our opportunities for such discussions, on the one hand, while adding to the depth of our knowledge when the occasions did arise, on the other. Life gives and life takes away, and that’s okay.

The conversation about happiness at Frank and Gail’s was launched by an article that said, among other things, that one of the criteria for a happy life that researchers have discovered, from interviewing lots and lots of people, is meaningful work. People who are consistently happy have a sense that what they spend half their waking hours doing – their eight-hour-a-day, five-days-a-week job – matters. Happy people believe that what someone pays them to do in some way makes a positive contribution to the world. They are giving back or paying forward. They are making a difference, however modest, in the lives of people, and even the planet, around them. They are giving of themselves. And they are, in general, happy.

This morning’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew is the story of the wise men, and it makes me wonder if the truth about the link between happiness and giving was embedded in this tale of mysterious visitors to Jesus long before sociologists or social psychologists began interviewing lottery winners or running experiments on people’s brains.

Is giving not the message that even the youngest child can take from this story? Isn’t that the action that focuses our attention? We don’t know how happy those visitors from the east were; Matthew calls them *magoi*, the Greek word from which our word “magician” comes, and this is the only place in the Bible where that Greek word is translated as a wise person.

But a lot of human experience, coupled with the growing body of scholarship on happiness, suggests that giving, wisdom, and happiness tend to reside together. Wise people have always seemed to know that giving and happiness go hand in hand.

Karl Menninger, one of the founders of the famed Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, was once asked what advice he had for people who thought they might be about

to suffer a nervous breakdown. He suggested that they lock up their house, go across the tracks to the less fortunate part of town, and do something good for someone who couldn't pay them back. Giving, Menninger realized, is good for you.

But we, in our twisted way, think that buying is good for you. A friend of mine calls it "retail therapy." When you're feeling blue, go out and buy something; it'll make you feel better – at least for a little while.

And there is some truth in that advice. I know, because I lived for a good many years in the genteel poverty of a student's life, when every cent went for books, tuition, and room and board. There was no discretionary income during those years, and not having money in our capitalist, consumerist society prevents you from being like everyone else. You're an outsider, not in the game, not a player. When you have to pay for virtually everything in society, and you have nothing to pay for it with, you become invisible, a non-entity.

And none of us wants to suffer that fate, and so we work and work and work – at least half our waking lives we spend working – in order to be able to buy our identities, our self-esteem, and our place among our peers. In America, and increasingly around the globe, we are what we buy.

And it isn't easy to avoid this trap. I know because I bought my personal and professional identity by purchasing one of the best theological educations money can buy. I am a pastor and a teacher, roles I am proud to claim, by virtue of education, training, and experience, all of which were made possible by my having or being loaned enough cash to purchase them. And all those scholarships that I and so many other bright students have received over the centuries – someone paid that money forward. And we even use money to purchase that which doesn't yet exist; we call it "investing in the future."

So let's not kid ourselves into thinking that we can be holy enough to avoid cash economies; we can't. Even the mendicant friars of the Middle Ages, who depended directly on charity, needed someone who had enough surplus to feed and clothe and house those Franciscans and Dominicans who tried to live Jesus's radical life of poverty and non-violence.

So buying and selling makes us a part of normal human society and as we used to say back in the '60s, there's no such thing as a free lunch, at least not in our economy.

But what about God's economy, the economy reflected in this morning's story of giving and being given? Is nothing free there? The star that led those astrologer-interpretors to Bethlehem – who paid for that? The Holy Spirit that overshadowed the Palestinian girl Mary – who hired it? The miracle of an ordinary, human birth – who wrote its price tag?

In our highly artificial world of cash economies, you can have whatever you can afford to buy. But in God's more elemental economy, the essentials are given: life, love, relationships, purpose, meaning. The fruit on the trees, the grapes on the vines, the fish in the streams, the fowl in the air – all were here when we arrived and none came with a dollar amount. They were all given, part of a creation blessed by a loving creator in whose likeness and image we believe we are made. And what might that image and likeness be? Might it be to give, just as we have been given?

The book of Acts records a saying of Jesus not found in any of the Gospels. In chapter 20, verse 35, Paul quotes Jesus as saying that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." Where do you think Jesus learned that? Initially from his parents, almost certainly, who raised him to be a good Jewish boy. And did Mary and Joseph tell Jesus, as he grew up, of that visit by the strangers from the east when he was a baby, and how they gave him his first gifts? Did hearing that story of giving and being given fill the child

with wonder at the greatness of God's power to inspire people to give of themselves? Did those sages from the east set the example of honoring God through giving that the boy Jesus would grow into?

It's hard to say what Mary and Joseph made of the visit of the magi, but we can be pretty certain that it left its mark, not only on them, but also, through them, on their child. The wise men appear in the Bible unexpectedly from the mists of history and speculation and they returned to those shadows just as quietly; they're never heard from again. But they made the point God wanted them to make: they gave of themselves in response to the gift of this child, this King of the Jews, this savior for the whole world.

We don't know if the magi were happy; what we know is that they were wise and that they gave; are we as wise as they?

Let us pray. Dear Jesus, our Captain and our King: Give us the grace to be generous. To give and not to count the cost. To fight and not to heed the wounds. To labor and not to ask for any reward save knowing that we do thy holy will. Amen. (From Ignatius of Loyola.)