

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

*“Strange gifts or gifts from strangers?”*

Matthew 2: 1-12

Pastor Paul Rohde

23 January 2008

Sisters and brothers, grace and peace in the name of Christ who calls us together. Amen.

I count the days my children were born among the most profound and blessed days of my life. Remembering labor sends me to my knees in gratitude for my wife and all she gave. Remembering the miracle of life emerging before my very eyes sends me to my knees in gratitude for God’s exhilarating creativity.

There was a distinct difference between the first and second births—not in our excitement or our love or our eager attentiveness. But in the birth of our second child, we had to wonder how daughter #1 would respond. There really was no question in our minds that a sibling was a gift. There was also no question if we could somehow make them like each other. We’d done all the coaching, brought presents for the two of them to exchange, gave effusive affirmation of how great it’d be to be a sister. I vividly remember—and sometimes I feel yet—the holy vulnerability that turns control to trust. “Come on you guys, like each other!”

This is, of course, a sappy, sentimental introduction to what could rightfully be a novel. The Bible would have us believe that in a world of others we all live this novel—sisters and brothers all. History books and almost any newspaper record how often and tragically the story becomes a murder mystery. In many ways this sermon is about how we respond to others of God’s children. And how do we respond to their gifts.

In some ways Epiphany widens the frame of the Christmas miracle. I’m glad for the encouragement of the season to linger at the miracle of birth—God become human in Jesus. The Epiphany story widens the lens to include the siblings, the others who come. Throughout the New Testament, Matthew is no exception, Israel [the Jews] are God’s first born. And a huge question of the entire New Testament is how Jewish Christians would respond to Gentiles, to foreigners who come with strange gifts. Gentiles and foreigners include nearly all of us. The first question of the Epiphany text is not will we accept them, but will we be accepted? And if we think frankincense and myrrh are strange gifts, I’d argue that beer and schnitzel, tea and crumpets, lutefisk and lefse are just as foreign.

Epiphany celebrates that with the wise men, we were adopted, welcomed. Our gifts are also accepted as valid expressions of worship and adoration before God become human in Christ.

In a predominantly Christian context we tend to hear the text and the sibling question from the opposite point of view. How do we respond to gifts of others we find strange? Will we accept these strangers and their gifts? I hear and hope the Epiphany Gospel move us in various ways. Certainly the text moves us not only closer to God, but closer to those who come along side us. It will move us to both offer and receive our gifts—however strange. I could hope it moves us beyond a focus on *what* is brought to *who* is bringing it.

Most crucially I hope the Epiphany story moves us out of assuming the power brokers will figure it all out. The wise men start there. They assume Herod can show them the way. It's very clear the Gospel is more about inspiring dreams of new ways. They did not return to Herod, but came home by another way.

As we pray for the *healing of the nations* in chapel this month, it seems an appropriate time for us to consider that right now Christians in the world have a powerful opportunity to meet siblings and receive gifts. Last October 138 Muslim leaders from every branch of Islam and every continent of the world sent an open letter to Christians. It is called "*A Common Word between Us and You.*" With very careful work in Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qu'ran, the letter seeks for Muslims and Christians to find a common basis for peace because love of God and love of neighbor are central to the faith for all of us. I quote from the document,

Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimizing some of their formal differences—it is clear that the *Two Greatest Commandments* are an area of common ground and link between the Qu'ran, the Torah, and the New Testament. Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity [and Judaism] are founded.

The website for the full text of this document is printed in the bulletin. [<http://www.acommonword.com>] I've begun conversations with members of our religion faculty and hope we can have a forum next semester to consider what Muslims are saying. . . and how Christians may respond.

Is it too far fetched to suggest that once again the body of Christ has received a gift from wise teachers in the East? If it were up to me, I'd have had Christians author the centrality of love and offer it to neighbors. . . .but like our text the gift comes unexpectedly from others and begs our response.

A response penned by theologians at Yale Divinity School states:

What is so extraordinary about A Common Word Between Us and You is not that its signatories recognize the critical character of the present moment in relations between Muslims and Christians. It is rather a deep insight and courage with which they have identified the common ground

between the Muslim and Christian religious communities. What is common between us lies not in something marginal nor in something merely important to each. It lies, rather, in something absolutely central to both: love of God and love of neighbor. Surprisingly for many Christians, your letter considers the dual command of love to be the foundational principle not just of the Christian faith, but of Islam as well

I am delighted that theologians in the Vatican and Canterbury; at Yale and in the ELCA are responding. Even if they all agree, I don't believe their decisions will either fulfill the Gospel or accomplish world peace. Is the Gospel not about all the visitors dreaming new ways home? At Augustana are we not about equipping everyone to give and receive, to consider and reflect, to pay homage with our own presence to Christ and to honor the worship and gifts of foreigners.

How do we respond to a God who calls us to love each other as well as Christ? Do we remember that we were once foreigners in the covenant of God, whose adoption was controversial and whose welcome is still costly? Does the love of God not want us to know that siblings are gift?

The Bible wants us to know we're living that long story of sibling love and rivalry. I started this sermon remembering that this most basic gift of love easily and often becomes bitter—even deadly. Maybe there is no relationship like siblings that calls us to self-examination AND openness, to similarity and difference, to depth of love and fragility. The Gospel will not let us read a page without knowing that other people are nevertheless gifts.

Some of those siblings will come to the table beside you today. Do you see the gift in their coming? What response does the dream of the wisemen compel you to offer? And some of those distant cousins have sent a gift to the whole body of Christ on earth. How will we respond?



**EUCCHARIST**

- L: The Lord be with you
- C: And also with you**
- L: Lift up your hearts
- C: We lift them to the Lord.**
- L: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God
- C: It is right to give God thanks and praise.**

**PRAYER AND LORD’S PRAYER**

**DISTRIBUTION** “*Litany of the Nations*” Alyssa Nance, cantor  
Congregation will sing the response: “***Peace be Yours***” to each petition  
At the end of the verse, congregation sings: “***For the healing of the nations, we prayer to you, O Lord.***”

**BENEDICTION**

- L: Deep peace of the running wave to you.  
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.  
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.  
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.  
Deep peace of Jesus Christ to you. - Iona community
- C: Amen

**POSTLUDE** “*Sonata in F Major*” III *Alegreto* C P.E. Bach

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CHAPEL CALENDAR

- Fri. (25<sup>th</sup>) Worship, 10 am - Kris Dahlen, Sr. Spkr.
- Sun. (27<sup>th</sup>) Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
- Mon. (28<sup>th</sup>) Taize Prayer, 10 am
- Wed. (30<sup>th</sup>) Holy Communion, 10 am - Dr. Jerome Freeman

In the sermon today Pastor Paul will refer to "A Common Word Between Us and Them"--a message from the worldwide Muslim community to the worldwide Christian community released last October. The website for the full text of the document is <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=38>

A list of links to Christian responses is at <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=38>