***Giving Gifts, Getting Many More Back***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

January 5, 2020, Epiphany Sunday

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I have been reading a book over the holidays by management consultant Margaret J. Wheatley. One thing that this book does is to place the reality of our society today within the larger context of history. She captures my attention early on as she cites seminal scholars who suggest that, based on certain patterns of behaviour, it seems that our society in a state of collapse.

I’m going to make this short and hopefully to the point: I think many of us are worried about this world and that values that our culture is teaching our children and grandchildren. Wheatley affirms our worries.

One significant symptom of how society is collapsing, she cites, is what she describes as our belief in never-ending progress that pushes us collectively to change our environment instead of, as healthy natural systems do, adapting to reality.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is an arrogant mindset that we see caricatured daily in news. At the heart of that arrogance, I’m thinking, is an attitude of entitlement that we cannot blame entirely on our leaders. After all, political leaders anyway are a reflection of us, the citizens who elect them.

Any hope for positive change in this system called society that we live in, is for all of us who care to be courageously honest, and generous in spirit.

Matthew the gospel writer is brutally honest as he describes the ruthless rule of Herod; the Magi wander into the heart of a manipulative and dishonest leader and system.

But there is another system at play in Matthew’s story: foreigners who study the stars, and for some reason feel compelled to make a long and risky journey, going out on a limb, or maybe based on some sort of faith that the stars will guide them towards wonder. There have been many embellishments on this story of Persian scholars journeying to pay homage to baby Jesus, but, at the heart of the story is generosity, isn’t it?

After a long journey they present their gifts, then they bow down before this holy child. Imagine their experience. Their investment of energy, sacrifice of their creature comforts, bringing their priceless and deeply symbolic gifts. I imagine between the lines of Matthew’s story is a holy silence, an understanding that this birth is a message not just for Jews, but for all people in that time who yearn for a new message that replaces the abusive style of *Pax Romana* – the ancient Roman brand of peace that is commanded, not earned.

At the heart of this story is generosity and vulnerability. Observing American methods of diplomacy in recent days sadly seems to mirror the brutal, narcissistic Roman system. But if there is a Good News message to be gleaned from today’s story from Matthew of Magi journeying to Jesus, it is that at the heart of being human is to be generous. When all the world seems to be collapsing, we dare to pay attention to our dreams – just as the magi did, especially the dream that told them to return home without visiting Herod.

Perhaps I’m naïve, but I believe that generosity begets generosity. Your presence here on Sunday is generosity of your time, believing that investing your precious time and faith in worship will be worthwhile – and, once in awhile, hopefully you take home a “treasure”, an idea, a melody, a line of prayer from worship that equips you to live with honesty, courage and fierce hope, in the face of the culture around you that often feigns those values.

This world, your world and mine, needs honesty, courage, hope.

God can’t change our society without us living those values. Shine the way ***you*** were created to, and have the faith that God will be right beside you as your ways clash with this world’s ways. Amen.

1. WHO DO WE CHOOSE TO BE? Facing reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity. © 2017 Margaret J. Wheatley. Barrett-Koehler Publishers. Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)