

**Sermon January 5, 2020**

**Charlie Fuller**

*Welcoming a King*

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

This story is universally known. We sang the story just a few minutes ago. We see it memorialized in nativity scenes.

Do we focus on the journey? The star? Herod and his evil agenda? The identity of the wise men? Where they came from?

This morning I'd like us to focus on one particular portion of the story. In the Greek text, we see three occurrences of the word *proskyneō*. Our reading translated it "pay homage to." *Proskyneō* was commonly used to denote the image of prostrating oneself at the feet of a king. Think of the humility of that image. The emptying of pride and self. Kings literally laying on the ground paying homage to this baby King.

Their very journey was a humble act of sacrifice, a sacrifice of time, energy, and treasure. The opportunity to bow before this king had to have been the culmination of not just a physical journey, but a spiritual one as well. And their spirits led them to act on what had happened to them. They responded in action by humbling themselves and giving great gifts to this baby king.

Christina Rosetti said it this way:

**(In the bleak midwinter – last stanza)**

What can I give Him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;

Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

Christina Rossetti understood *proskyneō*. To bow before a king, this king in particular, is to offer all that we are – our hearts, our minds, our spirits, our bodies, our wills, our actions.

And even more, the wise men were acting on an expectation common in ancient Middle Eastern cultures.

They were welcoming a King.

“Welcome” or hospitality was a fundamental value in the ancient world. It was an inhospitable region. They were surrounded by terrain that was rocky and difficult to navigate, scorching hot, and devoid of water most of the year, with no protection from thieves and robbers. People didn’t just hop into their air-conditioned cars when they traveled.

In the ancient world, especially in this desert region populated by nomadic tribes, hospitality was not only totally necessary, but a sacred duty. When a traveler was given hospitality, they came under the guaranteed protection of their host and provided cleansing for dusty feet, as well as food, shelter, security, and companionship.

We also find hospitality emphasized throughout Scripture.

It begins in Leviticus (19:33-34): “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), typically misused as a story condemning same-sex relationships, is actually about hospitality. The townspeople are condemned for refusing

to offer proper and expected welcome and care for the strangers visiting Lot and his family.

The prophet Elijah received hospitality from the impoverished widow and her son (1 Kings 17:8-16). The prophet Elisha was so often hosted by a Shunammite woman and her husband they actually built him his own room on the roof of their house. (2 Kings 4:8-17).

In the Gospel of Luke (Chapter 10) the famous story of the Good Samaritan is all about showing hospitality to the stranger in your midst.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans specifically calls for them to “extend hospitality to strangers.”

And hear these words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew (25:37-40):

<sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

The author, pastor, advocate, and sociologist Tony Campolo tells this story about a time he was in Hawaii speaking for a conference. He was bedeviled by jet lag and went out in the middle of the night when he couldn’t sleep.

“Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be

served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name, "greasy spoon." I didn't even touch the menu.

The guy behind the counter came over and asked me, "What d'ya want?"

I said I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut.

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him.

As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Come on," said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the guy behind the counter, and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah!" he answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," I told him. "What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with measured delight, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her."

"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"

"No way," said Harry (that was his name). "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes - and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind

of the M.C. of the affair) and when they came in, we all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our singing with "happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I - I mean is it okay if I kind of - what I want to ask you is - is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to." "Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all just stood there motionless, she left.

When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"  
Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all like to join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning?"

He was new at his school. His family was new to town. His dad had taken a new job that had moved them halfway across the country. He didn't know a single person. They didn't know him. He didn't know how he was supposed to dress, what people liked to eat, what kinds of words they used, what games they played on the playground, whom he should say "Hi" to, whom he should avoid. He was stepping into a new world, one almost totally unknown to him. And he was totally unknown to them as well.

Have you had that experience? Walking into a totally new place, a new community? Maybe it was when you went to college?

That was my story. One August morning in 1975 my parents said goodbye to me and left for work. I drove away on an eight-hour trip to Waco. A place where I knew exactly two people.

Maybe it was a new workplace. A place where you knew no one and weren't even sure what your job duties would be.

What if, as we celebrate Epiphany this year, we followed the example of the wise men? What if we discovered what it looks like to offer our deepest devotion, giving our very hearts to Christ? What if we discovered that at least part of what that looks like is offering a deeper welcome to others? Embracing those inside and outside these walls not just in the abstract, but in the actions we take, the conversations we have, the true embrace of people in *their* wholeness – *their* identity, *their* ideas, *their* thoughts and dreams?

What would that look like? May God give us the grace, the courage, and the perseverance to make that so – one conversation at a time, one relationship at a time. Amen.