



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “CONSIDER THE GIFT OF GOD’S LOVE”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 19; Matthew 2:1-12

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 20, 2020 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...”

We have some close friends who are in retail, and, under normal circumstances, they travel to what they call the “market” several times throughout the year, and they go and they take a look at the inventory. They try to predict the trends and they make their purchases, and which is to say that a great many stores, they bought what you see on the shelves today months, and months and months ago. It is like a scene from one of my favorite Christmas movies, *Elf*. Santa comes in after a busy night of delivering gifts, and looks at his eager elves, and tells them that it’s time to start getting ready for next Christmas! No break, no break at all!

I was fascinated to learn that, despite the impact of the pandemic, the National Retail Federation projects Christmas sales to exceed 750 billion dollars this year, and if it tracks like that, then it’s going to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 3-5% more than last year. You add to that the flowers, and the stamps, and the food, and the mileage – it is hard for us to comprehend the full economic impact of Christmas.

And I suspect that we all buy into this phenomenon in some form or fashion, both literally and figuratively, and while I’d like to think that we are simply taking Jesus at his word when he said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” when we think about those words in their original context, and when we consider them in light of who Jesus was, and is, and when we consider the implicit design of giving to the weak and the vulnerable, well, I dare say, unless we are talking about giving to things like God’s Gift Shop, that Biblical mandate doesn’t always jive with our modern day practices of giving. After all, it is not like we are buying for family and friends those basic necessities of life. It’s not like they’re having a hard time making ends meet. No, very likely we’re buying for people that we know and love, different shades and variations of things they already have, many of which they don’t really need.

We, who are here this morning...most of us are quite well off. And in comparison to most of the world, we live like kings. To be certain, we live in a world where countless people will go to bed tonight hungry. Many people, they long for water...of all things. We live in a world where there is present more fear and loneliness than we might imagine; indeed, in the face of that kind of scarcity, ours is an abundant life, indeed!

So what do we give to that person who seemingly has everything...or at least much more than enough; to that person who already has pants and shirts and dresses...that person who has ties

and shoes and toys...what do we give them? Do we give them bubble bath for their pets or a pillow cover with our face on it? "Ah, but Holton, not everyone has everything!" And I'll give you that – I'm not going to argue that point! But I'm not talking about material possessions. Obviously no one has everything! And even those who do have all kinds of stuff...even they can still be quite poverty stricken.

Our family watched a movie earlier this week called, *The Man Who Invented Christmas*...it was a surprisingly good little movie. We hadn't seen it and we hadn't really heard about much of it before. It's an imaginative look at Charles Dickens' life, and what may have been the circumstances around his writing of that classic tale that we know as, *A Christmas Carol*. The story itself is familiar enough - a man named Ebenezer Scrooge appears to be the richest man in town...clearly his miserly life has led to the accumulation of a great amount of wealth. The irony, however, is that Ebenezer Scrooge may look like he has everything, he actually has very little – very little of any lasting value, that is. If you know the story, then you know that Scrooge spends virtually his whole life thinking that he's in control, and he doesn't even notice -- until it was almost too late -- that the very strength of his prudent character was actually his greatest vice. To put it another way, Ebenezer Scrooge's uncharitable decisions had ultimately had a very negative and cumulative impact upon his life, and they had essentially robbed him of any meaningful and enduring richness.

The miracle of that story is that for Ebenezer Scrooge, there does eventually emerge a change of heart – a change of life, really...and what a wonderful message that is for us at Christmastime, or during any time for that matter...to know that material possessions do not bring us wealth. Our stuff, it does not provide one iota of eternal value to our lives...only God can do that! And how can such a divine richness be ours, we may ask? Well, the answer is really quite simple: we become rich as we welcome Christ into our hearts – when Christ, as that great Christmas hymn puts it, "casts out our sin and enters in and is born in us today!" You see, when we realize that we are sinners...when we come to know that we are in desperate need of God's mercy...when we recognize that we have nothing apart from the saving grace of God – In other words, when we affirm that we are, in fact, poor of spirit...ah, then we can be rich! Jesus put it this way: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs will be the kingdom of heaven."

Consider again that first Christmas and those people to whom Jesus came who could aptly fit the description of being poor in spirit. They were named Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth – they were unnamed shepherds...and these people were not dust grovelers? They didn't bemoan the fact that some people had so much and they had so little! Not that any of that would have made them poor in spirit anyway! No! For them, it was a matter of knowing that without God's presence in their life, they were all but spiritually bankrupt. And that blessed awareness - - that belief and the repentance which followed -- that is what made them poor in spirit!

What a surprise it must have been for the wise men to have searched for the King of the Jews and to have found a baby in a stable! Here they were with precious gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, finding this King not in a palace where we would expect a King to reside, but a hole in the wall in Bethlehem -- in a place where animals would customarily reside.

This is one of the stories I wish the Bible would have told us a little bit more about - these wise men - how it was that such powerful and wealthy people brought these exceedingly valuable gifts to the only person who has ever lived about whom it could be truly said, "He has everything." Because, Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, he needed not one of those gifts! Not one. Nevertheless, the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh, they came...and we often forget about them, don't we? Ah, but I bet Mary and Joseph didn't. Now, we don't know how they were used, we just don't, but we could probably reverently speculate and imagine how those gifts may have been of help and a blessing to the family.

Maybe those gifts were used to help establish Joseph's carpenter business as the family was in Egypt for a period of time. Or maybe Mary used some of those treasures to help Jesus go to a religious school where he became well-versed in the Scriptures...to the point that, one day, those rabbis would come to listen, to hear what he had to say about them! I wonder if there was some element of those gifts left over by the time Jesus began his ministry, and if any of it functioned as the seed money for the disciple's small treasury which was overseen by a disciple named Judas?

But that's all speculation - all of it...no one knows what happens to those gifts! What we do know, is that we never hear about those gifts again. Read on from this, the first of the four Gospels...read on through to last verse in the last chapter in the last book of the New Testament...we will never know exactly what happens to those gifts! And yet somehow, I think that is very important, and I think that it is really important because as special as any of our earthly gifts we might provide - be it our time or energy or substance which we are called to give - oh, what God wants more than anything else...is our hearts! That those wise men fell down on their knees and worshipped the newborn King - that is what made them poor in spirit, but that is also what made them rich beyond their wildest dreams!

Yes! God has called us to give to the needs of the poor and give to the works of Christ's church, but if we are to do any of those things with any spiritual integrity, we must first give to God the one thing that God truly wants...our lives! Too many people these days are oblivious to what matters most in life. So caught up are they in the richness of things that they think they have everything, when in actuality -- and within God's economy of salvation, they really have nothing!

I am sure that I can speak for my fellow colleagues in ministry when I say that we are always grateful for the kindness that you show us here at First (Scots), especially during the Christmas season. We sometimes receive just the most lovely handwritten cards or perhaps other things, and, believe me when I say those are all very much appreciated. But I can also tell you that the greatest gift we receive is the joy that comes in knowing that we, as a community of faith, we are growing in wisdom and in favor with God; that we are forevermore learning what it means to be poor in spirit; because, when we learn that, dear friends, by God's grace, we receive our greatest treasure...the very kingdom of heaven!

Let us pray...

God of mercy, who are we that you would choose from among us a husband and a wife - a mother and a father - who to look after the greatest of all gifts? We praise you that in the gift of your Son, the world has been given life! Lord, may we, by your Spirit, may we continually present

ourselves as a living sacrifice, a joyful response to your everlasting love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.