**The Gift of Ecumenism**

January 16 & 23, 2022

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Matthew 2: 1-12

Today we begin two Sundays where we recognize the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by having a pulpit exchange among our Living Spirit Centre partners. I am happy to be here with you today as part of this exchange. We are also in the season of Epiphany and the organizers of the Week of Prayer from the Middle East chose the gospel we read today, about the journey of the Magi to come and worship the Christ Child. The Magi are understood to be from the far east, Persia and were astrologers and/or Zoroastrian priests. It is understood as well that they were no friends of the Romans so would be supportive of a King or new leader that they believe will stand against the Roman Empire. Thus, they are considered to be gentiles, and as such the story conveys a message that Christ comes for all nations, and while they pay him homage with gifts, and honour the child and what he represents, they don’t convert and follow him. This is an important ecumenical message. In any ecumenical endeavor, it is important that we respect each other’s theological and liturgical perspective. It is not about converting one another, it is about enriching our journey together. This has been my experience of ecumenical relationships.

I have had a number of ecumenical experiences during my life, where I have found this to be true. My first ecumenical opportunity was probably my involvement with Tuxis Youth Parliament in Alberta from 1979-82. This was a model youth parliament where initially young men (we voted to include women during my time with them, in 1980) aged 15-25 gathered to debate topical issues and explore a Christian theme. There were young people from a variety of denominations and it was during this time that my call to ministry formed. Even though we were from different denominations we grew in our faith through the conversations, worship and small group discussions we engaged in together.

From there I went to an ecumenical theological college to train for ministry. The Centre for Christian Studies was a United-Anglican training centre, and Emmanuel College, the United Church Seminary, was part of the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto. I took courses from the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and United Church colleges. In my second year I participated in the Canadian Ecumenical Theological Students Conference where we broke into small groups to create a worship service that was not of our own tradition. After my commissioning as Diaconal Minister, a ministry of Education, Service and Pastoral Care, I was settled in my first church in Lloydminster, Alberta in 1986. While in Lloydminister, I met Brian, my now husband at an ecumenical (Lutheran, United, & Anglican) young adult conference in 1987. He lived in Ontario and when it became clear it wasn’t safe for him to move to Lloydminster, we settled in Toronto and I eventually got a job as a youth worker with the Downtown Churchworkers’ Association, an Anglican based outreach ministry where I worked for six years. Another enriching ecumenical experience, where I worked with former street youth, church youth and community youth in the inner city.

More recently, from 2017 to 2020 I was part of the United-Anglican Dialogue group which included working toward mutual recognition of ministry, where we could share ministers, like the Anglicans and Lutherans do, and understanding episkope, exploring such things as how the United Church structure fits in with bishops and widening our understanding of apostolic succession. I was there as both a Diaconal Minister and as one who works here at the Living Spirit Centre, a different kind of shared ministry. Indeed, my presence and experience enabled the group to widen the church’s understanding of ecumenical shared ministry. They also gained a better appreciation for Diaconal Ministry, which is rooted in the deaconess and deacon history of the church. Many were very surprised to hear me describe how we are commissioned as diaconal ministers because the action is the same as those who are ordained, the vows and laying on of hands, just the words describing the ministry are different. Another ecumenical enrichment.

One of the key learnings for me from being a part of this group was hearing about the Lund Principle. The Lund Principle was developed by the 1952 Faith and Order Conference of the World Council of Churches in Lund Sweden. It is an important principle in ecumenical relations between Christian churches and affirms that “churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately”. In other words, we should do together everything we can except where we differ so greatly that we can’t. I believe this is a good guidance for our LSC ministry together. There is much more that we could do together than what separates us, and that is the gift of our partnership. Even where there is separation – such as I am not able to preside over Anglican or Lutheran Communion, we have permission from the Bishop for the Anglican and Lutheran congregations to receive United Church Communion from me. Experiencing our different traditions and practices from each other enriches our understanding and experience of one another and helps us understand what is important for us in our own traditions. We have greatly benefited from sharing things like Messy Church programing together, our Advent and Lent services, and shared Sunday morning services through the a year. I am very glad to be sharing ministry with Alex Campbell, Immanuel’s Indigenous minister and the opportunities that will provide for all of us. This includes the Doctrine of Discovery online event this Tuesday January 18. This is essential learning for all of us non-indigenous folk to learn about this doctrine, how the church supported and encouraged the colonization of new lands and our role to repudiate it. I encourage all of you to attend this important session if you can. This kind of social justice ministry is definitely something that unites us that we can do together.

The Magi came to the Christ child and offered gifts. We receive many gifts from one another in this ministry and as we celebrate that, I wish to close with this reflection on the gifts of the Magi by Diana Butler Bass in her book Grateful. She begins by reflecting on wise men of the nativity set:

I was also fascinated by the wise men, those mysterious kings from the East. I did not know entirely what to make of them – their black and brown faces forming a compelling counterpoint to those of our white baby Jesus and his mother. The wise men wore regal robes and carried exotic gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – to an infant born to peasants in a barn.

I understood one thing, however. There was no way that Jesus and his family could ever repay the debt of gratitude owed by receiving these presents. Nothing would – nothing could – be given in return. The manger scene was not a gift exchange.

What must Mary and Joseph have thought? What insanity was this? They, good Jews, subjects of Roman oppression, did not receive gifts from kings. Indeed, kings took from them – their freedom, hope, dignity, livelihood, land and taxes. Maybe the whole business of gifts from the Magi made them a little afraid. The New Testament says that Mary “treasured” not the gifts, but these confusing things and “pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2: 19). …

The story of the three kings is a not a pretty tale; it is a pretty radical one. It inverts how we think of gifts. Typically, peasants offered a gift to a king to demonstrate loyalty or request a favour. But when kings bring gifts to peasants, it turns what we think of gifts and giving on its head. … The baby did nothing to deserve the gifts and cannot repay any debt of gratitude. This giving of gifts reverses the normal order of things, showing not the power of kings, but the undoing of the benefactors’ status and entitlement. What wonder! What surprise! Obligation is gone, replaced by complete astonishment. Repayment is neither possible nor necessary. Gifts are truly gifts, not debts to be discharged. The relief might make our hearts fill with the surprise of kind tenderness, the ache of thanks. The baby, the star, and the wise men: a story of gifts and radical gratitude. Joy to the world!

May we treasure not only the gifts of the wise men, but also the gifts of the partnership we share and the opportunities it presents to us. May we truly work toward unity as we share in ministry together.