

A Partridge in a Pear Tree

Matthew 2:1-12

Crossroads Christian Church

Psalm 148

First Sunday after Christmas A

12/29/13

Since we're in a good mood today, let's begin by looking at a song that you've heard many times through the Christmas season, but really belongs to right now—the season between Christmas Day, December 25, and Epiphany, January 6. It's about an old European tradition of giving small gifts on each day of the Christmas season, ending w/the day before Epiphany. The song, of course, is "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Now you won't find it in the hymnals, but you will find it just about everywhere in seasonal concerts, television shows, and pumped-in music. You'll find spoofs of it, like the Metro East Singers doing "The 12 Days After Christmas." But have you ever stopped to listen to the original song? It can be downright scary.

On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree. Okay. That makes sense, sort of. My true love and I like to give fanciful Christmas presents to each other. And we both like our bird feeder for the oak tree just outside our living room window, and we've had real joy thru the year watching purple finches, goldfinches, flickers, juncos, and of course sparrows come to dine. So we have finches in an oak tree; not partridges in a pear tree, but close enough.

But here's where the song gets complicated. There's a second day of Christmas—and here the singer receives two turtle doves—okay, we have doves scratching around under our birdfeeder picking up what the finches drop, but here comes another partridge in yet another pear tree! And the third day, three French hens (we don't have any of those around our house but

we did have French toast the other night), two more doves, and still another partridge. Now let's stop and do the math—but I warn you, it's scary—by the time Epiphany rolls around and the season of Christmas is over, it comes to a total of:

12 drummers drumming, 22 pipers piping—and what if those are bagpipes instead of little flutes or piccolos, what a racket that would be—30 ladies dancing, 36 lords a-leaping, 40 maids a-milking (and I presume a like number of dairy cattle), 42 swans a-swimming, a like number of geese a-laying, 40 golden rings, 36 calling birds, 30 french hens, 22 doves fluttering and cooing, and 12 partridges, each in its respective pear tree.

Now it's staggering to imagine just what someone would do with 100 musically inclined people, a small dairy operation, 2 rings for each finger or toe, 184 birds, and, of course, the trees, which might end up growing pears. Did you think that your Christmas was frantic, and did you look forward to these quieter days, a time to catch your breath? What if every day between Christmas and Epiphany the FedEx truck, the UPS truck, or a cattle truck pulled up to your door with some of that cargo?

Okay. We've had a little fun trying to make sense of a nonsense song—something that wasn't supposed to make sense to begin with. But those little spontaneous gifts of love that we give to our loves, or that we receive from them, don't we really want them to be spontaneous, romantic, and sometimes a bit silly? A new dust mop may be necessary around the house, but it doesn't make a very sweet Christmas present, does it? "On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me a dust mop in the pantry" just doesn't have the same flavor. The gifts that we value most in our heart aren't necessarily the ones with the most utility. Instead, the partridges in a

pear tree, the surprise, sentimental gifts that have a meaning all their own, are the ones that we're more inclined to sing about.

Long before this song was written, though, people have had a similar philosophy of giving. Around 2000 years ago, for example, three oriental wise, scholarly sorts—be they kings, magi, astrologers—three gentiles from other lands—noticed, so the story goes, something new in the heavens that signified the birth of a great king. Some say that it was a new star, maybe a supernova that exploded just at the right time. Others say that it was the planet Jupiter in a cosmic dance with the star Regulus that sent the message. At any rate, a new king was to be born in Judah, so they chose the gifts that they thought most appropriate and set out on the way. They stopped first at the palace—everybody who was anybody was born in a palace, you know. They didn't find him there; instead, they found a paranoid old ruler who would kill anyone—including his own sons—who were a threat to his power. But they did receive a clue—they were more likely to find the baby in Bethlehem, the old city which had once been the home of David, Israel's greatest king.

So on down the road they traveled, and finally found the family—not in a manger, according to Matthew, but later, in a house. Maybe the holy family had found a shirt-tail relative who took them in until they were ready to go back home to Nazareth. The magi entered, and knelt at the crib in what was probably a shabby little house, and offered gifts—gold—frankincense—myrrh. What strange gifts to bring a baby, especially to a baby born in a stable! Now if the wise men had been of a more practical bent, they might have given a bassinet, a year's free diaper service, and a portable crib. But these weren't practical men, they

were *wise* men. They knew something big was happening here—they didn't know what, but somehow they knew that a whole new way of life just might be opening up to the world. So in giving the gifts, they gave themselves to the future—they made themselves witnesses—they gave themselves to the future by giving the child the most precious gifts they had—the beauty of gold—the richness of an incense offered to gods—anointing oil for priests and kings. What more beautiful gifts to set before the redeemer of the world? These wise men may have been impractical, but they had the wisdom to respond with the very best they had to this wonderful gift of God.

And think for a moment about an even greater gift—the Christ child himself. Some pragmatic sort might think that God could have chosen a more practical gift—a vaccine to cure the world's diseases; a peace plan between the nations; a plant that would feed the world's hungry people. But instead, the gift came as a baby—and what's less practical than a baby? What do you do with a baby, except feed it, clean it, burp it, keep it warm, protect it, love it, and cherish it? A very impractical gift for a needy world, some might think. But it's the gift of love—the gift of God's presence with us—the gift of reconciliation between heaven and earth.

In one of my favorite musical plays, the *Fantasticks*, two practical fathers try to deal with their love-struck offspring. Why, complains the father of the girl, couldn't she be more practical, more sensible, more useful? He put his complaint into a song: "You plant a turnip and get a rose." We planted the turnips of our hopes and expectations of what God could do for us, but God knew better and gave us a rose instead. He gave us the rose of undying love. By sending us the Son, God gave us all the right to become children of God. Children

of God—not much use in that, some might say—it won't fill your stomach. You can't put it on your resume, you can't wear it to keep the cold winds of winter off your back, it won't pay the rent. But it's priceless—it redeems our whole lives; it makes our lives rich and vibrant. God gave us a baby born in a stable, and he gave to all of us the right to become children of God. This is a gift worth more than all that we have, because it makes all that we are precious in the eyes of God.

So what should be our response to this great and unimaginable gift? Some people ignore God's greatest gift as impractical, and go grab the lesser gifts—power, money, respectability, status—to lead what this world calls the good life. But there's more to life than just taking, than just being comfortable, than just "having it all."

Instead, we know that receiving the gifts of God implies giving in return. When we receive something precious, we want to share it. We want to give in response to the greater gift. But what can we give in return for something so precious? Maybe not a whole lot. But we can give our hearts. But God's love can transform our bumbling, hesitant souls into something beautiful. We can love the best we know how. We can work for peace and justice the best we know how. We ourselves can become like those little partridges in the pear trees—gifts of love, joy and beauty in a dark and dreary world. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

