



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Tending the Gifts *December 26, 2010*

The Rev. Sharon Gracen

There's a lovely Christmas legend told about the Holy Family's flight to Egypt – flight from Herod's anger and fear of a baby who might someday challenge his position and power. Matthew's gospel tells the story of how Joseph was warned in a dream to move his little family out of harm's way. The next day Joseph packed his family, set them upon their reliable donkey, and got out of town. The legend also tells that a band of Herod's men who were in pursuit, determined to carry out their assignment – to kill all the baby boys under 2 years old. As evening fell, Joseph searched for a safe place to spend the night – out of the cold and out of danger. That night it was a cave that fit the bill. After Joseph had inspected the cave – checking for other predators – he led a tired Mary and sleeping Jesus to the back of the cavern. By the mouth of the cave was a small spider, which began to spin her web across the opening – she worked urgently, as if compelled to complete her task. Before long, she had woven an intricate silken barrier across the entire mouth of the cave. The exhausted spider finally rested. About that time the patrol of soldiers made their way up the rocky path, checking every nook of the rocky mountain side that might hide the fleeing family. As they came to the cave, the first soldier noticed the web and quickly motioned his soldiers past it, assuming it to be unoccupied. The humble work of that tiny eight-legged guardian angel had saved the precious baby's life. Joseph and the spider tended God's gift well.

The aftermath of Christmas often reveals many of our most treasured and unexpected gifts. The expressions of joy on a child's face, a rare reunion with family members, recipients of gifts from the Angel Tree. Sometimes it's the nature of the gift that makes it special, other times simply the nature of the giver. Misshapen clay pots with your child's name and age scratched into the bottom can be more precious than gold – cherished gifts through the years – all carefully protected in bubble wrap when they need to be moved.

I am a cookbook aficionado – each one is like a treasure box, full of individual culinary adventures. As a young cook, I had always wanted to add *The Joy of Cooking* to my collection. I considered it sort of the Bible of the kitchen. About 25 years ago, I finally received that glorious book for Christmas and was rather idiotically overjoyed – savoring the shiny cover and particularly the three red ribbons, used to mark one's favorite recipes. This was a serious cookbook – a great gift. By the end of the morning however, my rotten little dog – Max's predecessor – a usually well-behaved Westie named Skye – had chewed the cover and eaten the ribbons. I was devastated, furious at the dog now cowering under the table and disappointed in myself for leaving it where a nefarious little canine menace could get go it. Now, 25 years later, I receive my unexpected gift from that book—each time I look at it I am filled with the sweet memory of that wonderful little dog that lived with us for seventeen and a half years. Who knows – someday maybe even the memory of those French black high-heeled pumps with Max's teeth marks in them may also give me a giggle or two, but I'm not there yet!

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A good understanding of stewardship as a way of life will remind us that all that we have is a gift. The disciplines that we engaged all through Advent are designed to help us keep our priorities grounded in God and our practices focused on God's kingdom. We're never too old or too young to begin such spiritual work. Parents are faced with these decisions all the time and are usually still learning the lessons themselves.

Some years ago, communities and schools became creative in their attempts to halt the growing rate of teenage pregnancies – young people who are not prepared for the gift of a child. One of the ingenious ideas that one particular school system came up with was requiring young girls – and sometimes boys as well – to carry and care for a sack of flour, or an egg, essentially having to tend to it all day long. In other cases, the kids were given computerized dolls that could be programmed to wake and cry and demand attention – sometimes all night long. In many cases these girls quickly dismissed the romantic notion that a baby would instantly become some darling little person who would love them and came to realize the huge responsibility involved in caring for a helpless infant. Sometimes, part of tending to a gift is in the preparation for receiving it and the wisdom to know that you might not be ready.

In the season of Christmas we have all been given the gift of a child – a gift for which we may or may not be prepared. Throughout the last two thousand years, the Church has tended to and safeguarded this gift and allowed us the time to experience the many hidden and unexpected gifts that flow from it; gifts of community, friendship, fellowship, and belonging. One of the great sustaining purposes of the Church is precisely to safeguard the stories, traditions, and sacraments that serve as life-giving expressions of the Divine presence. The Church is the steward of the gift of Christ.

As we look around this beautiful church, we see evidence of how the great gift of Christmas has been held in love and honor. Each of these poinsettias represents someone who is remembered and loved. It is a tradition of the Altar Guild to “green” the church and change the ribbons on the front door wreaths from the Advent color to Christmas red. The sights and sounds of Christmas were well celebrated here in this historic building, itself is a gift from the congregation back in the 1850s, and it has received much loving attention over the last 150 years. As we tend this gift, we are able to share it with the community – when those red doors are open, people can't help but be drawn to see what is inside. The beauty is already here – it's up to us to create the welcome which is a way of honoring all of our gifts.

Tending to the gifts we are given, in order that they would continue to generate more unexpected ones, means not just being good stewards but being generous stewards. It is axiomatic in God's Kingdom, whether here on earth or in life eternal, that the more you give away that which you value, the more blessed you will become. Yesterday, I talked a little about what it mean to be blessed and shared with you my perspective—to be blessed is to be fully known and held in the attention of another. When you give away what you have attended to most diligently and what you value most dearly, you share yourself and are therefore more fully known, just as we know God most fully in the gift that he gave us in Jesus.