

Sermon/Reflection

Phew, finally, it's over! What a relief, right? I don't know about you, but Christmas can be seriously exhausting.

Right after today's time of worship it's time for Operation Take Down the Christmas Decorations. The Christmas tree, the garlands, the ornaments, the decorations—they're all going into storage until next year. Maybe you've already done this at your house? Or perhaps you've got a pile of stale Christmas cookies you're not sure what to do with. Are they for the birds, your unsuspecting kids' lunchboxes, or still awaiting their fate on a plate?

For many of us it's back to the grind. Kids, maybe grandkids, head back to school, and adults return to work, if they had some time off during the holidays. You know the holiday is over when routine sets back in.

But you know what? I notice that at Christmas, we tend to be kinder to family, friends, strangers, even people we don't necessarily like. We're a tad more thoughtful, generous, and considerate. The world just seems happier when we're all kinder. It's like we get a glimpse of how God intends us to be.

It's beautifully captured in part of a poem by Edgar Guest, which goes something like this: "Human beings are the finest towards the finish of the year; We are almost like we should be when the Christmas season's here..."

The danger is, once our Christmas stuff is safely packed away, we may also pack away the spirit of kindness and generosity that permeates the Christmas season. That is why it is so important for us to hear Matthew's account of the Wise One's seeking out Jesus.

After all, this story takes place after the birth of Jesus.

And it's a great story. Strangers on a mysterious quest. A jealous king. A guiding star. Extravagant gifts, given in awe and wonder to a young child, and a secret escape.

Mary, standing there watching all of this unfold, must have been dumbfounded by the generosity of the three visitors. How wonderful that these three strangers from the east were not only committed to finding this special child, but they were also willing to do whatever was needed to bestow their joyful excitement in finding him and offering the best of what they could give as an expression of their joy.

The Rev. Stephen Iverson tells this story about giving and generosity:

Several years ago, a faithful member of a congregation I was serving offered me a gift. In this instance I was hesitant to accept it for a whole host of reasons, the biggest being that I considered the gift to be far too extravagant and costly for what I knew this person could afford. But I could tell by the expression on this person's face and the joy that radiated from their eyes that they had thought long and hard about offering such an expensive gift.

When I tried to dissuade them from giving me this gift, they looked at me and began to sob, almost uncontrollably. Through their cracking voice they said to me words so powerful that I will never forget them: "Please, please do not reject my blessing that I am giving to you."

They were willing to do whatever was needed to bestow their gift to me.

The person in this story is reminiscent of the poor widow in the story from Luke. Jesus points her out as an example, when "she out of her poverty put in all that she had". Again, someone willing to do whatever was needed to give and bless.

Faithful offerings, gifts of faith, can never be evaluated by the number of zeros contained in the price of the gift. Faithful offerings, offerings of blessing, come from the deep and profound joy in knowing that what we have offered makes a difference and is significant and meaningful. What joy we feel in our hearts when we offer the least is nothing compared to when we offer our best. Doing whatever it takes, in order to be generous and share whatever we can, is certainly part of following the Way of Jesus.

Faith, commitment, and compassion form the bedrock of generosity. Offering meals for those at risk and who live daily with food insecurity, visiting a neighbour who otherwise lives in isolation, financially supporting broader community projects in Canada and around the world, are opportunities to practice generosity and grow deeper in our faith. This is the blessing that we get to take part in through our generous gifts to the Mission and Service of the United Church. Mission and Service works to transform lives, inspire meaning and purpose, and helps in the building of a better world.

Let me give you just two examples.

Mission and Service Story #1

Storytelling is a powerful way to preserve and share history. The theatre performance, Bunk #7, does just that.

Bunk #7 shares the true story of six boys rioting against the mistreatment and many forms of abuse they received at Edmonton Indian Residential School in St. Albert, Alberta, in the early 1960s. Written by the late Nisga'a MLA Larry Guno, the play is based on his own experience at the residential school and named for his bunk number.

The cast features Indigenous youth and young adults, offering a powerful way for the cast and audiences to learn and share the story of cultural resilience. In November 2021, the play premiered at Raven Theatre in British Columbia to a full audience. With overwhelming support, the performers went on a tour of northwestern BC to share the transformative journey.

Your gifts to Mission and Service open opportunities for storytelling to move forward in an impactful and powerful way. Thank you for your generosity.

Mission and Service story #2

When we think of education, many of us envision a classroom with books and chalkboards. But education extends far beyond that. Through

education, we can learn how the world works and how we work in the world.

The Women and Family Services division at the Church of Christ in Congo provides children with the education and training they need to take charge of their own lives when they leave school. With a combination of traditional education and life skills, they provide each child with the skillset they need to thrive after graduation.

Through funding, livestock and seeds are purchased to teach children sustainable agriculture. Older children have the opportunity to assist with livestock after their classes. They learn to care for chickens and take part in odd jobs in the fields.

Your generosity through Mission and Service helps fund programs that inspire learning and skills for life. Thank you.