

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
January 3, 2010 – Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2: 1-12

If you remember it, join me in reciting this old nursery rhyme:

“Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight:
I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight”.

In the spirit of this rhyme, and using today’s gospel story of the wise men following a star, and bringing three gifts to the child in Bethlehem, I want to share with you three wishes I have for us as a congregation as a new year gets underway.

My first wish is for us to continue to build an inclusive community. Matthew makes a strong point by describing the magi as coming from the East. What he means is that they were Gentiles. And the idea behind all this is that Jesus is the manifestation, or epiphany, of God for all the world. Even though Jesus was born to Jewish parents and was raised in a Jewish home, and practiced, of course, the Jewish faith, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is for Gentiles, too. Jesus, the Messiah, is a reconciler. He brings people together who wouldn’t normally be together. Saints and sinners. The lost and the found. Rich and poor. The strong and the weak. Insiders and outsiders. The powerful and the powerless. And here in this story, a Jewish family in Bethlehem and Gentile magi from Babylon, the resident and the foreigner, the religious and the secular. Jesus brings them together.

Our greatest strength as a congregation is also our greatest challenge -- building and maintaining an inclusive community. It’s the community part that is hard. People can be welcomed here, and we can be here in this same building together – with our different colors, our different sexual orientations, our different economic situations, our different backgrounds, and so forth – but coexistence isn’t necessarily the same thing as communion --- sharing space doesn’t necessarily make us into a community. And my wish is for community. For us to really know each other and care about each other, and to work together to build up the whole body, the whole church, and not just the parts we already know, or the parts we like the most. For example, what if the Active Redeemer Men helped our mission team get ready to host the churches from Vermont this summer – not just a couple of them, but all of them? What if Sisters in Spirit and the Wednesday Bible Discussion group got together from time to time? What if the families and groups of friends who each sit on their own side of the sanctuary went out to lunch once or twice a year after church with a family or group of friends on the other side of the sanctuary? What if the people who sit up front brought a picnic lunch on summer Sunday and shared it with the people who sit back in the parlor? What if the people who regularly volunteer at the InterAct meal also helped out with the Interfaith Hospitality Network team? What if the classical musicians, and the jazz musicians, the folk and blue grass and gospel musicians collaborated on a spectacular night of music for our community --- or came up with an alternative worship service we could offer

every so often? What if we hosted an Open Table for the Reconciling Ministries Network that truly reflected Redeemer --- with the praise dancers dancing and the bell choir ringing and the Quartet and Sisters in Song singing? An Open Table service that really demonstrates openness?

What if we made being in fellowship and communion with each other a priority? I like how this preacher puts it for her congregation: “One of the things I wholeheartedly believe about those who dwell in community is that you don’t have to like those you live with, but you do have to love them. To make a decision to live in, and support each other in the bonds of community is difficult, rewarding, and sometimes unpleasant; but I would choose no other way. The goodness of diversity in unity with brothers and sisters of faith far outweighs the difficulties” (sermon by Patricia de Jong in Lectionary Homiletics, vol XXI, number 1, p. 48).

Amen to that. So community is my first wish upon the epiphany star. My second is generosity. The magi brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. These were not bargain basement gifts. These were not leftover gifts. These were not white elephant Christmas gifts, either. They were costly. They were royal. They represented the very best the wise men had to offer. And the wise men opened their treasures freely and generously. I wish for a spirit of generosity to pervade us as a congregation. And I mean generosity of all kinds: financial, participation, compassion, kindness, commitment. My wish is for this to be a church where we give of ourselves with glad and generous hearts. Where we’re responsible, of course, but not tight-wads. Where we’re practical, but not uncreative. Where we’re committed to doing the right thing, but still not afraid to do what’s merciful or what’s loving. Where more of us say yes than no, and ask when? Instead of why? I wish for gift-giving to flow freely and joyfully among us. Teaching gifts. Leadership gifts. Caregiving gifts. Artistic gifts. Theatrical and musical gifts. Financial planning gifts. Parenting gifts. Gifts of healing and compassion. Organizational gifts. Cooking gifts. Carpentry and cleaning and home repair gifts. Office management and computer operation gifts. And so on. You get the idea. I wish for us to practice extravagant generosity.

And I wish for us to let our light shine. That’s my third epiphany wish. For us to let our light so shine that others can see God’s goodness through us. To reflect the light of the world in our part of the world. To not hide our light – but to let it shine. Through our mission giving --- to the Free Clinic, to InterAct Cleveland, to the Heights Emergency Food Center, to UMCOR, to our United Methodist World Service and Conference Benevolences, to Nothing But Nets, and so forth – but also through our mission doing: at the Food Bank, at our community and InterAct meals, our summer mission trip, Interfaith Hospitality Network, and, I hope, even more. I wish for the Church of the Redeemer to be a bright shining star in our community --- offering light, direction, and hope to people’s lives, so that others may experience Christ’s transforming and saving and healing love. Because that’s how today’s gospel story ends. The wise men returned to their own country by another way. Their lives were changed, and now they knew to avoid the old ways of King Herod – the ways of death and fear, the ways of revenge and retribution, the ways of greed and domination. So

they returned by another way. That, in a nutshell, is our mission as a church. To offer new beginnings to persons stuck in old ways, to open up new opportunities for people to live life in ways that bring wholeness and hope, joy and love. Our mission is to proclaim the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation. To practice the good news of peace and justice. To reflect the good news of acceptance and trust. To participate in the good news of restoration, renewal, and resurrection. That's why we are a church. That's what we do. And my wish, therefore, is for us to live out our mission – shining God's light, sharing God's love, showing forth God's ways.

Community. Generosity. Light. These are my wishes upon the epiphany star, the star of wonder, the star of light, the star of endless beauty bright. As this new year unfolds, may we be strengthened as a community, may our gift-giving be joyful and generous, and through all that we say and do, may the light of Christ shine, shine, shine. Amen.