

The Joinery of Love

(Isaiah 60,1-6); Matthew 2:1-12

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC, Camden, Maine; January 5th, 2020

We are celebrating *Epiphany* today. This Greek word means “to make manifest, apparent or clear.” We are saying that something is becoming clear or manifest about God’s being, purpose and call to us in the context of our Gospel story and our own lives today. When we come to the manger in Bethlehem, we are for starters making the audacious statement that God is particularly manifesting God’s all-pervasive presence and love in a vulnerable baby. Moreover, we are proclaiming that true authority, healing, leadership, and guidance for our world rest in this tiny baby born to vulnerable parents in a volatile place and time. What could be a more potent reminder of how God’s ways are not our ways? Are we willing and able to recognize the presence of God here and in this way?

The wise people who come from afar model a shift of consciousness of seeing in a new way. It is gradual. First of all, their very presence makes manifest that the whole world is invited and needed if this new way of life manifested in this child is to have a future. The new covenant God is making in the world invites the wisdom and presence of those who have been branded as outsiders, as other, or even as ungodly. The sages also mirror for us how hard it can be to let go of our assumptions about where authority and power resides. They naively first do the expected and look to the palace of King Herod in the capital city to find the new king to be born. Their announcement of the pending birth of a new king puts the fear in brother Herod and all the political and religious elites of Jerusalem. The wise people then nearly become the unwitting assistants to Herod’s plot to kill the child. The old King is frightened by a baby in swaddling clothes. As the Spirit intercedes, Herod and all who will preserve power for power’s sake at all cost and by all means necessary are eventually revealed to be fear filled and broken. The old emperor/king has no clothes.

Like the wise people, we have to ask ourselves to whom or what we pay homage/ respect. Do we trust in the radically different way of life manifested in this child? Do we dream with Jimmy Hendrix who once said, “When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will be healed?” With all the latest news of escalations, assassinations, drone strikes, and potential

retaliations, we are currently sadly manifesting again that we have not understood God's ways revealed in Bethlehem. We are still living in a world that trusts an eye for an eye, us vs. them, strength defined as power of each other more than the mystery of love revealed in the Christ child. Interestingly, the tradition has often suggested that the wise people may represent the orient, perhaps Persia or Arabia – some of the very zones of conflict and proxy wars in our day. May this be a potent reminder that we need each other today as much as ever as allies of a different way of life.

The wise and transformed people in our story also bring gifts that shed a particular light for us on the mystery of love revealed in the child. Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (notice that myrrh is not included in Isaiah) speak not only of Christ's dignity, leadership, and preciousness, but also of his vulnerability. They bring frankincense, an aromatic resin from Arabia that was often used to anoint kings. They also bring myrrh, an expensive resin used for beauty treatments and for anointing the dead. This part of the story tells us from the beginning that this child anointed to heal the world will also die at the hands of a humanity unwilling to be transformed. By the power of God, his death will not be the end of him or of our healing.

I would like to focus more closely on the gift of gold which is a symbol of royalty and true richness, durability and malleability. Let me shift to the realm of our personal struggles as we explore this gold. I recently came upon a unique use of gold that speaks to how Christ's life, death and resurrection models the journey of our own lives. I would like to tell you about Kintsugi, meaning "golden joinery." (You may have seen some bowls with turquoise inlay and such – some Kintsugi looks similar). It is the Japanese art of repairing broken porcelain using gold to fill the cracks. Kintsugi emerged as part of the overall Japanese philosophy of Wabi-Sabi which values and works with imperfection rather than trying to hide it. I learned about it through an article written by Sue Cochrane.¹ Sue Cochrane drew on the imagery of this art form when she was given the task to be the keynote speaker at a meeting for an innovative national health care organization. You also need to know that Sue is living with a terminal metastatic

¹ www.dailygood.org/story/2413/kintsugi-the-golden-joinery-of-love-sue-cochrane/

cancer diagnosis. She journals about her experience and what makes it possible for her to stay positive and even joyful.

By using the shining gold to mend or join broken pieces (with the help of epoxy), Kintsugi actually emphasizes the crack rather than hides it. Practitioners of Kintsugi often consider the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original piece. This is quite countercultural to how most of us have been raised. Sue Cochrane comments that our culture tends to send the message: “if something is broken, toss it out; if something is flawed, hide it.” Her own life had long felt like it was broken apart beyond recognition. Cochrane grew up in an abusive home with a family struggling with alcoholism and poverty. It was her maternal grandmother who provided solace and belonging. Whenever she could, the grandmother provided a shelter and home filled with the good smells of baking, nurturing home-grown food and love. Though not much was spoken, love was shared.

After her grandparents had died, Sue turned to alcohol to soothe old and new pain. She kept wishing for the past to have been different. Sue was increasingly feeling angry and resentful about the fact that her life felt so hard. She struggled to try to “fix herself” which usually increased her own suffering and that of others. Sue realized that she was always wishing “to be unbroken pottery instead of who [she] was.” Things did not change until she began to courageously show her broken edges to others rather than hiding them. She needed safe spaces for the this. Her recovery program, therapy and other safe communities became part of her healing partly because she was received without judgment. Our healing and growth can emerge from that place of love. It is most often a slow and on-going mutual journey of learning to love ourselves and each other.

For Sue Cochrane, what she would describe as broken parts are now no longer primarily (or even at all) “wounds” but are now a part of her whole history and the woman she has become. There is a saying in Kintsugi: “The true life of the bowl began when it was dropped.” It is how we respond to our life that will in many ways determine how much we suffer and/or thrive. It all begins with love. This is especially important where there has been trauma. When we are

safely received with compassion, without being abandoned or abused again, healing can happen.

Just as our stories of healing vary in intensity, there are three patterns of repair in Kintsugi depending on the breakage. Some breaks leave complete and large pieces intact and the pieces are just rejoined using the gold. In other cases, small pieces may actually be missing and need to be filled in with the gold. There are also experiences of breakage with larger areas missing altogether or shattered beyond repair. In this latter case, a Kintsugi practitioner will opt to take fragments of other unrelated pieces to create a patchwork piece. For Sue, this patchwork approach best describes her own healing. Her grandmother's love, the mutual accountability and welcome within AA, dear friends, the transformational power of words in poetry and story all came together in Sue's life to create the joinery of love. I value how the patchwork image reminds us all that we are not independent isolated beings. We break together and while we also have individual work to do in our healing, we are dependent on each other's care, effort and love to heal. This is true for a family, a local community, and our global community.

Now let me go back to the Gospel story. When the Christ child is offered gold, we are also reminded of God's desire to help us mend together. Christ in many ways represents the gold of unconditional love that can mend a broken world. Christ lived and modeled love. He asked people who felt broken what they needed to be healed and empowered them to move forward. Sometimes, as the gift of the myrrh reminds us, this meant dying to an old way of life and thinking. Christ models for us that dying before we physically die can lead us to new life.

In closing, let me read a few lines from a poem by the Sufi Rumi entitled *The Guest House*.²

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

² Published in Coleman Barks, *The Illuminated Rumi* (1997).

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

The good news is that Christ loves us even when we cling to false power and pretense. But let us pray for our transformation. Let us not cling to pretense by covering up, denying or rejecting what feels broken and vulnerable in us. Let us not fall into the trap of projecting all our troubles outward. May the Holy Spirit empower us to create a loving and safe patchwork community that practices the joinery of love. Amen – may it be so.

[This part may be used as part of the invitation to communion: Christ told his followers that his own life and body would be broken because he refused to give up on love. And he empowers us still to be mended together as one living body in his name. This is what we enact in the sacrament of communion over and over again. As we eat the pieces of the same loaf, we remember that we all need healing and must not stop until all are healed.³ We need each other and we need God to help bind together what has come apart. That is actually the true meaning of the word religion and transcends any one religion.]