

Matthew 2:11b
December 19, '10

"FOUR LITTLE WORDS"
(Longer Version)

THIS MORNING, AT THE 10:30 SERVICE, OUR CHILDREN WILL BE PRESENTING A PROGRAM ENTITLED
"WHY THE CHIMES RANG."

AT THIS SERVICE, I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU, A LA PAUL HARVEY, "THE REST OF THE STORY."

"WHY THE CHIMES RANG" WAS WRITTEN IN 1906 BY A MAN NAMED RAYMOND MACDONALD ALDEN.

BUT IT'S A STORY BASED ON A SERMON THAT WAS DELIVERED SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE, BY A
PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER NAMED HENRY VAN DYKE.

IF YOU'VE BEEN FOLLOWING YOUR ADVENT DEVOTIONAL BOOK THIS YEAR, YOU KNOW THAT HENRY
VAN DYKE WAS A VERY PROMINENT CLERGYMAN IN THE EARLY PART OF THE LAST CENTURY.

HE WROTE HUNDREDS OF STORIES & HELD A VARIETY OF OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT POSITIONS.

HE WAS THE MINISTER WHO PRESIDED AT THE FUNERAL OF MARK TWAIN.

THERE ARE TWO OTHER THINGS, THOUGH, FOR WHICH YOU MIGHT KNOW HIS NAME.

FOR ONE, IT WAS HENRY VAN DYKE WHO WROTE THE HYMN "JOYFUL, JOYFUL, WE ADORE THEE."

IN 1907, HE WAS A GUEST SPEAKER AT WILLIAMS COLLEGE IN WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS, IN THE
BERKSHIRE MOUNTAINS.

ONE MORNING, AT BREAKFAST, VAN DYKE HANDED A MANUSCRIPT TO THE COLLEGE PRESIDENT & SAID,
"*HERE'S A HYMN FOR YOU. YOUR MOUNTAINS WERE MY INSPIRATION. IT MUST BE SUNG TO THE MUSIC OF
BEETHOVEN'S 'HYMN TO JOY.'*"

SOMETHING ELSE FOR WHICH YOU MIGHT KNOW HENRY VAN DYKE IS ONE THE MOST BELOVED TALES
OF CHRISTMAS – "THE STORY OF THE OTHER WISE MAN."

THE MESSAGE OF THAT STORY IS VERY MUCH THE SAME AS THE MESSAGE OF "WHY THE CHIMES RANG."

THEY BOTH SPEAK OF A TYPE OF CHRISTMAS GIVING THAT IS FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE GIVING
OF GIFTS.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING IS PERHAPS THE SHORTEST READING I'VE EVER OFFERED AS
THE BASIS OF A SERMON.

IT'S A READING THAT WOULD MAKE LITURGICAL PURISTS WINCE, BECAUSE IT'S NOT A READING FOR
ADVENT OR EVEN A READING FOR CHRISTMAS.

IT IS, PROPERLY SPEAKING, A READING FOR THE SEASON OF EPIPHANY.

IT'S JUST A BRIEF PORTION OF A VERSE.

IT'S NOT THE FIRST HALF NOR THE SECOND HALF OF A VERSE.

IT'S A SIMPLE PHRASE FOUND IN THE VERY MIDDLE OF A VERSE.

IT'S TAKEN FROM MATTHEW'S SECOND CHAPTER, WHERE WE READ THE STORY OF THE VISIT OF THE
WISE MEN.

IN THE MIDDLE OF VERSE 11, MATTHEW TELLS US THAT THE WISE MEN FOUND THE CHRIST CHILD AND – AS EUGENE PETERSON TRANSLATES IT IN “THE MESSAGE” – “THEY GAVE HIM GIFTS.”

THERE IT IS – FOUR SIMPLE WORDS.

I COULD HAVE EXPANDED THE SERMON TITLE BY SAYING “FOUR SIMPLE WORDS THAT CHANGE EVERYTHING.”

THEY DO, DON’T THEY?

“THEY GAVE HIM GIFTS.”

WHAT IF THOSE WORDS WEREN’T THERE?

WHAT IF, INSTEAD, MATTHEW SAID, “*THEY GREETED HIM WARMLY & WISHED HIM WELL.*”

WHAT WOULD THAT DO TO OUR TRADITION OF GIFT-GIVING AT CHRISTMAS?

WOULD THE ANNUAL SAVIOR OF THE ECONOMY NOT EVEN EXIST?

THE TRADITION OF CHRISTMAS GIFT-GIVING CAN PERHAPS BE TRACED TO THESE “4 LITTLE WORDS” – “*THEY GAVE HIM GIFTS.*”

CHRISTMAS GIFT-GIVING IS A MULTI-FACETED PHENOMENON.

IT’S UNDOUBTEDLY A GOOD THING – OR A FOOLISH THING, AS THE CASE MAY BE.

IT’S AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO FRIENDSHIP OR A TRIBUTE TO FASHION.

IT’S AN EXPRESSION OF GOOD NATURE OR A BID FOR FAVOR.

IT’S AN OUTGOING OF GENEROSITY OR A DISGUISE OF GREED.

IT’S A CHEERFUL OLD CUSTOM OR A FUTILE FARCE.

THE IDEA OF GIFT-GIVING, THOUGH, IS TAKEN TO A HIGHER PLANE WHEN WE LOOK UPON THE LIFE OF JESUS AS THE PRIME EXAMPLE OF WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO GIVE.

FOR, IN HIM, WE FIND AN UNSELFISH INTEREST IN THE HAPPINESS OF OTHERS.

THE GREAT GIFT OF JESUS TO THE WORLD WAS HIMSELF.

HE LIVED WITH AND FOR OTHERS.

HE HELD BACK NOTHING.

IN EVERY PARTICULAR & PERSONAL GIFT THAT HE GAVE TO OTHERS, THERE WAS SOMETHING OF HIMSELF THAT MADE IT PRECIOUS.

FOR EXAMPLE, AT THE WEDDING IN CANA, IT WAS HIS THOUGHT FOR THE GIVER OF THE FEAST & HIS WISH THAT EVERY GUEST SHOULD FIND PROPER ENTERTAINMENT THAT LENT THE FLAVOR OF A HEAVENLY HOSPITALITY TO THE WINE WHICH HE PROVIDED.

WHEN HE GAVE BREAD & FISH TO THE HUNGRY MULTITUDE WHO HAD FOLLOWED HIM OUT AMONG THE HILLS BY THE SEA OF GALILEE, THE PEOPLE WERE REFRESHED & STRENGTHENED BY THE SENSE OF THE PERSONAL CARE OF JESUS FOR THEIR WELFARE, AS MUCH AS BY THE FOOD WHICH HE GAVE THEM.

THE GIFTS OF HEALING WHICH HE GRANTED TO SO MANY WHO WERE SUFFERING WERE EVIDENCE THAT HE WAS WILLING TO GIVE SOMETHING OF HIMSELF.

HE GAVE HIS STRENGTH, HIS LOVE, HIS POWER TO THOSE AMONG WHOM HE LIVED.

WHEN A PARALYTIC WAS BROUGHT TO JESUS ON A BED, HE SURPRISED EVERYBODY & OFFENDED MANY, BY GIVING THE POOR MAN THE PARDON OF HIS SINS BEFORE HE GAVE NEW LIFE TO HIS BODY.

IT WAS BECAUSE JESUS ALWAYS SOUGHT TO SATISFY THE DEEPEST NEED & ALWAYS GAVE SOMETHING OF HIMSELF IN EVERY GIFT HE OFFERED.

THIS SHOULD BE THE PATTERN OF ALL TRUE CHRISTMAS GIVING.

THE FINEST CHRISTMAS GIFT IS NOT THE ONE THAT COSTS THE MOST MONEY, BUT THE ONE THAT CARRIES THE MOST LOVE.

THE LITTLE PRESENT OR THE RARE & LONG-WISHED-FOR GIFT MAY CARRY A MESSAGE SOMETHING LIKE THIS:

"I AM THINKING OF YOU TODAY, BECAUSE IT IS CHRISTMAS & I WISH YOU HAPPINESS.

AND TOMORROW, BECAUSE IT WILL BE THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, I SHALL STILL WISH YOU HAPPINESS.

AND SO ON, CLEAR THROUGH THE YEAR.

I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO TELL YOU ABOUT IT EVERY DAY, BECAUSE I MAY BE FAR AWAY – OR BECAUSE BOTH OF US MAY BE VERY BUSY – OR PERHAPS BECAUSE I CAN'T EVEN AFFORD TO PAY THE POSTAGE ON SO MANY LETTERS OR FIND THE TIME TO WRITE THEM.

BUT THAT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE.

THE THOUGHT & THE WISH WILL BE HERE JUST THE SAME.

IN MY WORK & IN THE BUSINESS OF LIFE, I MEAN TO TRY NOT TO BE UNFAIR TO YOU OR INJURE YOU IN ANY WAY.

IN MY PLEASURE, IF WE CAN BE TOGETHER, I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE THE FUN WITH YOU.

WHATEVER JOY OR SUCCESS COMES TO YOU WILL MAKE ME GLAD.

WITHOUT PRETENSE & IN PLAIN WORDS, GOOD WILL TO YOU IS WHAT I MEAN, IN THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS."

IT ISN'T NECESSARY TO PUT A MESSAGE LIKE THIS INTO HIGHBROW LANGUAGE OR TO SWEAR ABSOLUTE DEVOTION.

NOR IS IT EVEN NECESSARY TO PUT THE MESSAGE INTO WORDS AT ALL, NOR EVEN TO CONVEY IT BY A TANGIBLE TOKEN.

TO FEEL IT & TO ACT ON IT – THAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT THING.

THERE ARE A GREAT MANY PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHOM WE KNOW MORE OR LESS, BUT TO WHOM – FOR VARIOUS REASONS – WE CANNOT VERY WELL SEND A CHRISTMAS GIFT.

BUT THERE IS HARDLY ONE, IN ALL THE CIRCLES OF OUR ACQUAINTANCE, WITH WHOM WE MAY NOT EXCHANGE THE TOUCH OF CHRISTMAS LIFE.

THOSE "4 LITTLE WORDS" – "THEY GAVE HIM GIFTS" – ENABLE US TO FOCUS – NOT SO MUCH ON THE GIFTS THE WISE MEN OFFERED, BUT RATHER ON THE GIFTS GIVEN BY THE RECIPIENT OF THOSE GIFTS – THE GIFTS THAT JESUS GIVES TO US.

FOR PERHAPS WE *OBSERVE* CHRISTMAS WHEN WE THINK OF THE WISE MEN'S GIFTS, BUT WE *KEEP* IT WHEN WE THINK OF *HIS* GIFTS – AND IT IS A FAR BETTER THING TO *KEEP* CHRISTMAS THAN MERELY TO OBSERVE IT.

BUT HOW DO YOU DO THAT?

HOW DO YOU *KEEP* CHRISTMAS?

ARE YOU WILLING TO FORGET WHAT YOU HAVE DONE FOR OTHER PEOPLE, AND REMEMBER INSTEAD WHAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE DONE FOR YOU?

ARE YOU WILLING TO IGNORE WHAT THE WORLD OWES YOU & THINK WHAT YOU OWE THE WORLD?

ARE YOU WILLING TO CLOSE YOUR BOOK OF COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE MANAGEMENT OF THE UNIVERSE, AND LOOK AROUND YOU FOR A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN SOW A FEW SEEDS OF HAPPINESS?

ARE YOU WILLING TO DO THESE THINGS EVEN FOR A DAY?

THEN YOU CAN KEEP CHRISTMAS.

ARE YOU WILLING TO REMEMBER THE WEAKNESS & LONELINESS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE GROWING OLD?

ARE YOU WILLING TO STOP ASKING HOW MUCH YOUR FRIENDS LOVE YOU, AND ASK YOURSELF WHETHER YOU LOVE THEM ENOUGH?

ARE YOU WILLING TO BELIEVE THAT LOVE IS THE STRONGEST THING IN THE WORLD – STRONGER THAN HATE, STRONGER THAN EVIL, STRONGER THAN DEATH – AND THAT THE BLESSED LIFE WHICH BEGAN IN BETHLEHEM 2,000 YEARS AGO IS THE IMAGE & BRIGHTNESS OF ETERNAL LOVE?

THEN YOU CAN KEEP CHRISTMAS.

AND IF YOU KEEP IT FOR A DAY, WHY NOT ALWAYS?

BACK TO WHERE WE BEGAN –

YOU KNOW A PROMINENT PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER FROM THE EARLY YEARS OF THE 20TH CENTURY BECAUSE OF A GREAT HYMN – “JOYFUL, JOYFUL, WE ADORE THEE” – AND A WONDERFUL TALE – “THE STORY OF THE OTHER WISE MAN.”

BUT NOW YOU ALSO KNOW HIM FOR SOMETHING ELSE, BECAUSE THE ESSENCE OF THE SERMON YOU JUST HEARD WAS A SERMON OF HENRY VAN DYKE – AND NOW YOU KNOW “THE REST OF THE STORY.” AMEN.

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