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Ephesians 3:1-12  
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## Gifts of Grace

Good morning church. Today we celebrate the gifts of the Magi, wise people from afar. But as we contemplate the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Paul proclaims the gift of grace that is Jesus Christ breaking down the boundaries between the insiders and outsiders. Both of these are gifts of grace. What is grace? Unasked for undeserved blessing. A blessing, like unconditional love, the wasteful love of the father for the prodigal son.

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our gift for the world and receiver of royal gifts. Amen.

What does a Jewish Messiah do for the whole world?

This paradox sits at the heart of the Christmas story. Jesus was born to a poor Palestinian Jew in the first century. But Jesus's life and message still matter today, across an ocean and thousands and years. We won't come to a final answer today, but I think the story of the Magi and the ministry of Paul can help us get closer.

The Magi have gifts for Jesus. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These are royal gifts you would give to a neighboring king to start the relationship on the right foot. Gifts that Herod would assume were for him. So, the political message is clear, Jesus and not Herod is the legitimate king in the Gospel writer's eyes. The Magi ask who the king of the Jews, Jesus is. Matthew quotes the prophet, Micah. From Bethlehem will come a ruler who will shepherd my people.

The Magi give unexpected, undeserved gifts. Gifts of grace.

In Ephesians, Paul is justifying his ministry to the Gentiles. Or maybe it's better to say he is explaining why the gentiles have just as much right to this Jewish Messiah. Paul calls it a mystery that the gentiles are fellow heirs to the promise of Abraham. They are adopted into the family and are brothers and sisters. And I want to take Paul at his word because I am one of those gentiles who loves both the Old and New Testament. Believe me, I checked; I took a DNA test and was only 0.2% Ashkenazi Jewish. But I've got to admit Paul has an agenda. An agenda grounded and rooted in unconditional love. Paul believes Jesus, a Jewish Messiah, opens the door to God's wisdom to flow into the world.

Paul has an undeserved gift for the world, a gift of Jesus.

The only way I can wrap my mind around this radical statement is that something mysterious happened on the road to Damascus that changed Paul's life. Something so life-shaking he reversed his direction from a zealous persecutor to a zealous evangelist. He found an undeserved gift in Jesus, a community of disciples that loved him despite the harm he caused. He could not be silent about this love, so he spread it out into the world.

And to be honest, I find Paul's confidence kind of cringe and awkward.

My upbringing turned me off from evangelism. In Mennonite circles, I learned that evangelism happens through acts of service to your neighbor, and if they ask you why you're helping them, then you can mention Jesus. When I was in high school, I went on a spring vacation trip to Florida, where I told a bunch of people they were going to hell to scare them into going to church. On the one hand, it was thrilling to be part of the "good guys" saving souls. But in retrospect, I still carry a fair amount of guilt, so much that I'm not interested in telling people about the gift of grace that is Jesus unless they walk through those doors. COVID means I have not spent much time on outreach.

But you all have been teaching me a few things. Our new members opened my eyes to say that hospitality is a form of evangelism. Hospitality can be a warm smile and a cup of coffee, but it also tells everyone they have a seat at the table and are "one of us." Some of you also say that whatever your experiences in life are, whether you come from Mennonite Brethren, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, or Presbyterian, you all are one of us. And we cannot forget Paul, Jew or gentile, enslaved person or free, man, woman, or something in-between all are one. Somehow, in Christ, and if we try hard, we can all become one body, maybe even a family.

This hospitality is a mystery. I may not know who walks through our doors, but this text tells me they are already our brothers and sisters. Does this feel true to you? It doesn't make sense in my head, but it feels true in my heart. But let me take it one step forward to stretch ourselves. This passage challenges me to consider if others are looking for a church home but were turned off of church by people who acted like me as a kid, scaring them into going to church.

Just like the Magi gave Jesus a royal gift, expecting nothing in return. Just like Paul invited the gentile outsiders. Today I want to give the gift of Christ. The gift of unconditional love to all humanity.