Sermon title: Gifts That Matter
Text: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
By: Rev. Terry Carty
Date: 01-02-2011
Place: Kingston Springs UMC
Season: Epiphany Sunday, First Sunday in New Year

Main Point: The gifts we most need - a place of belonging and a place of sacred meaning - will be found when we offer them to others.

Acknowledgement: This is a 'third generation' sermon. It is a revised version of a sermon called "Gifts That Really Matter" by Rev Nathan Nettleton of South Yarra Community Baptist Church in Melbourne, Australia, which was a revised version of a sermon called "A Christmas Do-over" by Rev Jack McKinney of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. I am deeply indebted to both for the inspiration and the images.

For us in America, it seems that the big gifting season is over for another year. It actually ends with the final adjustments :). Did you get all your gift exchanges finished this week? Did you get the right size? The right color? What about the things that were on your wish list that you didn't get? Did you get out this week and buy yourself the Christmas gifts that you didn't get?

Today is Epiphany Sunday. Actual Epiphany Day is January 6 and it marks the end of the Christmas season – the 12th day of Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the coming of the Magi, wise men from the East, through whom Christ was revealed to the wider world.

Originally the Feast of Epiphany was the day when Christians shared their gifts with another in honor of the Magi's example of gift giving. Even today most Eastern Orthodox Christians continue this practice and many Orthodox kids will be opening their gifts with the same anticipation as our kids did 12 days earlier.

Since our gifting season is over, Epiphany may be a good time to think about what sort of gifts would really make a difference to our lives and our world. We stress so much over Christmas gifts, trying to make everyone happy. But when we think about it we know that no gift from a store or a website will fill up empty place inside of someone.

Today, as we remember the trip of the Magi and the strange gifts that they brought to the baby King, let us take a few moments to think of the sort of gifts we would like to receive that cannot be bought or wrapped in fancy paper.

«««««««««««««««««««

The reading from the prophet Isaiah describes a gift that we all hunger for: a place where we truly belong. The text uses the image of light to portray a new dawning for the Hebrews. Kings of other nations will honor them. It is a picture of restoration and a great homecoming as everyone returns to the place where they truly belong. This is the kind of place that each of us hungers for. We yearn to find that place where we not only feel comfortable, but loved and accepted.

As a sidebar: It is tragic that the homeland being described in this passage, Israel/Jerusalem, has become a place of bloody conflict rather than a place of peace. The Israeli hardliners think that the place is only for them while the militant Palestinians feel just as strongly that the homeland is theirs. Yet none in that Holy Land are able to feel the comfort, love, and acceptance of a place to belong.

The gift that cannot be wrapped and put under our Christmas tree is this place where we are loved without question, accepted without condition, and blessed without reservation.

«««««««««««««««««««««««

In his novel, Les Miserables, Victor Hugo describes the plight of Jean Valjean. Jean has just served nineteen years torturous imprisonment for something he hadn't done. Now on his release, he has the look of a large, angry monster. Everywhere he goes he is shunned because he is a former convict. No one will give him a place to stay or anything to eat, and he is becoming desperate. Finally a kind woman points to a door near the church and tells him to knock there. That place, she says, will not turn him away. Without knowing he is knocking on the door of the bishop, Jean bangs violently and enters quickly with these words:

"See here! My name is Jean Valjean. I am convict; I have been nineteen years in the galleys. Four days ago I was set free. During those four days I have walked from Toulon. Today I have walked twelve leagues. When I reached this place this evening I went to an inn, and they sent me away. I went to another inn, they said: 'Get out!' It was the same with another; nobody would have me. I went to the prison, and the turnkey would not let me in. I crept in a dog-kennel, the dog bit me and drove me away as if he had been a man. I am very tired-twelve leagues on foot, and I am so hungry. Can I stay?"

"Madame Magloire," said the bishop, "put on another plate."

The man took three steps, and came near the lamp that stood on the table. "Stop," he exclaimed, as if he had not been understood. "Everybody has thrust me out; will you receive me? Is this an inn? Can you give me something to eat, and a place to sleep? Have you a stable?"

"Madame Magloire," said the bishop, "put some sheets on the bed in the alcove."

At last Jean Valjean believed, and his face was transfigured from hardened gloom to a barely comprehending, stupefied joy; a suddenly beautiful face. Whether we have spent nineteen years in the dungeons, or have just have been searching for a door that will welcome us, the gift we all hunger for is to find the place where we truly belong.

«««««««««««««««««««««««««

But there is another gift we all hunger for that does not come in pretty paper. This gift is revealed in Matthew's gospel as we follow the long journey of the Magi. We remember the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but these are not gifts that most of us yearn for. But we do hunger for something that they found. At the end of their search, they knelt down and worshipped the child. They came a long way, put up with dangers of the road. Now they have found the one who is the goal of all their searching, the one they believe in, and the one to whom they want to give themselves. They have risked all to find the one who will give their lives meaning and give answers to their questions.

Isn't that what we all crave? To find someone or something that fulfills us; someone or something next to which nothing else really matters; the one treasure for which on struggle or sacrifice is too great. We would gladly give up many lesser gifts if it means discovering that thing, person or mission worthy of our ultimate devotion.

«««««««««««««««««««««««««

How do we gain such gifts? Where can we find the place were we truly belong or the thing worthy of our most sacred allegiance? As you can expect, I think this place is "in the church." This is a place where some people are accepted without reservation, were some people can worship, and were some people can serve the One who fills life with meaning. I sincerely hope and pray that this church is that kind of place for each of you.

But the reality is that if we only come looking for it, we are not likely to find it. That may be true of tangible gifts, but not with gifts of the Spirit. It actually happens the other way around – the real question is not how we get the gift, but how we give it away. If we want this church to be a place where we can truly belong, then we have to look at how we can make it that kind of place for others. If we want to find purpose, meaning and devotion within these walls, then we need to look at how we can help others find the same here.

The Christmas gifts that really matter this Epiphany are gifts that we must give away for there to be anything in them for us. In seeking to belong, we provide the safe haven for all. In hoping for meaning, we share the deep treasures of our hearts with others. We give away that which means the most to us, and we find our lives enriched beyond belief.

Here, in the church, we come with the gifts that we bring and the gifts that we are, so that in Christ we can become gifts to one another and together a gift to the world of belonging and meaning.