

A Gift Exchange

Worship for White Gift Sunday by Tiina Cote

Traditions around white gift giving are rooted in the wish to place equal value on gifts both large and small.

One may recall the fable in which peasants and lords were able to participate equally in the celebration of the king's birthday because all the gifts for the king were wrapped in the same white covering. Perhaps building on that fable, a tradition was born in 1903 when a small Methodist congregation gave white-covered gifts to others in need. In both situations, anonymity ensured that all gifts were appreciated equally.

Mary and Joseph were parents with little money, few rights, and little identity. They were anonymous among the faceless crowds of the Roman Empire. Yet they received the greatest gift of all—the baby Jesus. In turn, they gave their greatest gift to him—their love and a name from God. It was a gift exchange that changed the world.

A different take on the white gift tradition is suggested here, one where the anonymity of the people around us is shattered by the gift of taking the time to know someone's name.

Note: On Sundays prior to White Gift Sunday, invite people to bring gifts wrapped in white paper or cloth.

Props and Materials

- 2 children's wagons
- baskets
- cards and markers (sufficient for congregants to have one of each)

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come among us, God,
source of life and heart of all—
so that we may know your Love.

Come among us, God,
wrapped in human flesh—
so that we may touch and see and hear your Love.

Come among us, God,
blowing bubbles of joy and hope—
**so that we may become your Love in the world
and share the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance,
freedom, equality, and solidarity with all people.**

Come and be with your people, God as we come to worship you!

(With acknowledgements to the Preamble of the UN Convention on The Rights of the Child, 1990.)

GATHERING HYMN

Voices United # 1, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" or Voices United #4 "God of All Places"

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLES

OPENING PRAYER

God,
While our eyes seem glued to all the shiny new things
we want,
you tug at our hearts,
whisper our names,
entice us toward compassion and joy with others,
spin us into your web of relationships
and teach us to seek out each other's names.
May that be our first act of embracing the dignity and worth
of every human being within your web of creation. Amen.
(With acknowledgements to the Preamble of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.)

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Forgive us, God.
Songs fill our ears but leave us deaf to the cries
of your people;
Decorating consumes us but leaves us blind to need.
Busyness fills our days
but leaves us too tired to extend a hand;
Feasting increases but leaves us too full to fill
another's cup;
Forgive us, heal us, and open us to your Love
(silent meditation)**

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Rejoice and again I say rejoice! Grace and forgiveness are the gifts that God gives to each and every repentant heart today and every day. This is the promise that was born once and for all at Bethlehem! Thanks be to God! Amen.

HYMN

Voices United #17 “O Ancient Love” or *Voices United* #31 “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You”

(During the hymn, children collect the white gifts and place them on wagons, moving from the back of the sanctuary toward the front. After placing the white gifts on the chancel steps, the children take baskets of small cards and markers, place them on the wagons, and retrace their steps by distributing a card and marker to each person.)

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Jeremiah 1:4–8, Isaiah 61:1–4, Psalm 139 with refrain
(Voices United p.861), Matthew 1:18–21

INVITATION

As you reflect on these words of scripture, please take your card and write your first name. These cards will be part of your offering later this morning.

MEDITATION: “A DRAMA FOR TWO VOICES”

Have actors present the drama for two voices (page 45). This drama is based on the Preamble of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, 1948: “Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person...” and the UN Convention on The Rights of the Child, 1990, Article 7 (1) “The child shall... have the right from birth to a name...”

DEDICATION OF OUR TITHES AND OFFERINGS

Let us now give back to God the first fruits of the blessings we have received.

(Children take wagons with the baskets and follow the ushers, collecting the name cards and markers. They bring the wagons to the side of the chancel area and bring forward the baskets with the name cards as part of the offering.)

DOXOLOGY

**What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
Yet what I can, I give him, give my heart.**

(Voices United #55, “In the Bleak Midwinter,” verse 4)

OFFERTORY PRAYER

**Advent God,
You have called us by name,
and we now give ourselves to you through these symbols.
Multiply their goodness so that there is light
in the darkness,
dignity for all and hope and joy in every heart! Amen.**

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE (with actions)

God of all names and in all places,

we offer you now the concerns of our hearts. *(hold hands over heart)*

For the peace of the world, help us create a time when all faces and names are bound with the tenderness of friendship. *(hug self)*

For the leaders of all nations and those with power in the world, humble and enlighten all of us to be your servants of hope. *(hold hands out in front, palms up as if giving something; bow head)*

For all those who seek to protect the weak, challenge the strong, free the prisoner, and proclaim peace within violence, call us to stand with them to create dignity and secure human rights for all across your beloved creation. *(at chest level, clench one hand and hold it at the wrist with other hand)*

For the lost, the marginalized, the ones without hope, rekindle our will to ensure that every person has a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself or herself and of his or her family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care, and necessary social services *(Article 25 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights).*
(clench both hands and hold at shoulders)

For those alone, ill, dying, or in grief, encourage us to be like your angels who touch their brow with compassion. *(touch forehead with palm)*

For those whose individual names burn in our hearts, mould us into channels of joy that they too may know your presence among us. *(hold arms above head, hands open)*

This we pray in the name of Jesus, our gift of hope. Amen. *(hold hands with palms together and head bowed to hands)*

HYMN

More Voices #161, “I Have Called You by Your Name” or *Voices United* #567, “Will You Come and Follow Me”

SENDING FORTH

Go out into the world and seek the face of God.
Seek God in the ones you know
and in the ones with names you do not know as yet.
Go boldly, for you go with the Creator, Redeemer,
and the Spirit,
the source and sustainer of peace, dignity, tolerance,
freedom, equality, and solidarity between all. Amen.

BLESSING

Voices United #964, “Go Now in Peace”

The Rev. Tiina Cote is in collaborative ministry at Rock Chapel United Church and minister of family and youth at St. Paul’s United Church, both in Dundas, Ontario.

A DRAMA FOR TWO VOICES

ACTORS

Parent (P)
Child (C) 8–10 years old
person off stage to call the cell phone number

STAGING

table set for meal
tape script to table top
2 chairs
cell phone

SCENE 1

(Parent and child seated, chatting and “eating.”)

P: How did the rehearsal go today?

C: It was better now that Fredrick’s learned his lines. It’s hard to be an angel talking to Joseph if Joseph can’t remember what he’s supposed to say!

P: I can see your point...I’m glad things are coming together. Mrs. Simpson and your whole class have been working so hard on this year’s Christmas concert...

(phone rings) Excuse me, I’ll be right back. **(P leaves table to answer the phone; C continues “eating” but pauses periodically to listen to parent’s conversation)**

P: Hello. Oh, hi Lois, I’m so glad you...

P: That’s wonderful...are both babies doing fine? **(pause)** Wow, that’s a good size for twins! And Rebecca? **(longer pause)** I’m sure they’ll come up with names real soon.

(pause) Yes, I know it’s important to have a name for the babies. **(longer pause)** Just be patient, Lois. Got to go. I’ll call you later. Bye. **(puts down phone; returns to the table)**

P: Well that was good news! Your cousin Rebecca had the twins yesterday, and everyone is doing just fine!

C: What were you saying about names?

P: Rebecca and Sasha haven’t decided on the babies’ names yet, and your Auntie Lois is getting anxious.

C: Why?

P: She thinks they should have decided by now. But they probably want to make sure the names they choose are the right ones. Names are important you know; they say something about the person. **(C looks puzzled)**

P: _____ **(C’s name)**, do you remember what you say to Joseph in the play—about the naming of Jesus?

C: (mumbles to self as if going through the play’s lines, then smiles with success) Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

P: That’s right... Do you know what the name, Jesus, means?

C: (shakes head)

P: It means “God will save”; if you think about what Mrs. Simpson has been teaching you about Jesus, you’ll see how his name said something about the kind of person the baby Jesus was going to grow up to be.

C: (nods)

P: Names are important; that’s why Rebecca and Sasha need to take their time naming the twins.

C: (gazes into space)

P: (starts to “eat,” then notices C staring, watches for a few seconds) What are you thinking about?

C: Mom/Dad, do you remember last week when we took the white gifts from the church down to the Christmas store?

P: Yes, why?

C: There was a person sitting on the ground when I was walking to the front door. He was kind of scary...and lonely looking.

P: Yes, I remember.

C: He asked me my name; it seemed important to him, so I told him. Then I asked him his name, and his whole face turned into a smile. **(pause)** Why did he smile like that? Because I asked him his name?

P: I don’t know for sure, but I think when you asked him his name, you made him feel important. Most people just walk by, but you showed you cared.

C: (looks down and smiles a little)

P: That was a real gift you gave that man. **(pauses)** Just like the gift of love God gave the world on Christmas morning. Jesus grew up to teach us that every person is special and that God knows them by their very own name!

C: (pauses and says reflectively) I’m glad I asked that man, I mean Joe, his name, just to see him smile like that.

P: The memory of him and the warm feeling inside you even now is Joe’s gift to you. That’s a real gift exchange!

C: (chuckles, then pauses) So Mom/Dad, how did you pick my name?

P: Well, **(rising from the table)** that’s a long story. Bring your dishes into the kitchen and I’ll tell you all about it while we wash them. **(C and P pick up dishes and move off stage)**

—Tiina Cote