
"~Return and Get It' ~"An African Spirituality of Gift Exchange

A sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith, Priest Assoc

In the name of God, our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend! Amen.

Last week I heard that retailers are reporting a record year for people returning holiday gifts. Maybe you too returned that proverbial ugly sweater, or a wrong sized shirt, or something damaged in the mail. Maybe your iPad was the wrong color, or that flat screen TV had some defect or other.

Now we could say that today's reading from the Book of Acts is also about returning gifts, or about gift exchange. See what you think. In the story from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard earlier, the apostle Paul challenged the disciples he found in Ephesus to be re-baptized. We could say that he led them to exchange the baptism of John that they had previously received; to exchange it for a baptism that was better than the one they had.

Remember what they answered when Paul asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They said,

"We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

In other words they did not know until Paul told them that baptism in the name of Jesus was a better gift than the one they had. But as you recall from the gospel reading, John said,

"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me."

That's what John himself testified about his baptism compared with that of Jesus.

"I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

(Mark 1.7-8)

We too, if we heard it put in those terms, would be advised to exchange one baptism for a better one. Not to receive and enjoy the better one would be like the old men we hear about in some of those "old man" jokes.

Now let me apologize in advance for stereotyping old men with these stories. And I know it's no excuse that I'm one of them myself. But stories like these could really be told about anyone who doesn't know why they're not getting the best they could out of a good gift they have received.

Consider, for example, the story about the old man who was given a perfectly good electric shaver.

"My son bought me this newfangled shaver," he complained to the clerk at the gift return counter. "He told me it would let me shave in half the time and with fewer cuts than my old straight razor. But when I tried it this morning it took almost a half hour, and it pulled out more hair than it cut! I want a refund!" he insisted.

Patiently the clerk took the shaver and looked it over. He saw clumps of the old man's beard sticking out of the shaver blades. Then he said, "Let's see if we can tell what the problem might be."

He turned it over and tried to turn the power switch on. When nothing happened, he removed the base and found that there were no batteries in it.

Then he asked, "What happened to the batteries?"

The old man blinked his eyes, rubbed his rough bearded face a few times, and then asked, "You mean it needs batteries?" www.santabanta.com/jokes.asp?catid=8709

Now the surface meaning of this story is clear: Don't try to use an electric shaver the same way you would use a manual shaver! But in terms of our scripture readings for today there's a deeper teaching here: You don't need to return or refund a gift when you haven't yet learned how to enjoy the gift as it was intended to be received.

Epiphany is the season in which we are learning how the gift of the Christ child was intended to be enjoyed and received. Now Epiphany *day* occurred last Friday" always on January 6 in the church year or on the Twelfth Day of Christmas depending on how you count the days from December 25th. But Epiphany *season* extends all the way forward to Ash Wednesday or the beginning of Lent.

On Epiphany day we commemorate the magi, those three "wise men from the East" who gave gifts to the Christ child. These were gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that they brought with them after following a star: the epiphany star that led

them to the birthplace of the one they learned would be born "king of the Jews" (Matthew 2.1-12).

"Twelfth Night" you may recall is that English celebration that occurs on the eve of Epiphany as in Shakespeare's play with that title. Some cultures celebrate how the magi honored Christ as king by baking and giving "King cakes" on this occasion. But Twelfth Night also provides an occasion for carnival time; a time of revelry and disguise. Indeed in Poland, as well as New Orleans and throughout Louisiana, the shift to carnival season begins and extends up to Lent, culminating in Fat Tuesday or Shrove Tuesday just before Ash Wednesday.

Even our own church, on this First Sunday *after* the Epiphany, has already moved on from commemorating the magi and the day of Epiphany itself to observe another manifestation or the next epiphany of Christ. For the word "epiphany" means manifestation, and the church offers us different ways to mark the manifestation of Jesus as God's chosen One beginning with his manifestation as the Christ child.

Thus today we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus as God's chosen One at his baptism. That too was an awesome occasion. In some church tradition it is equally as awesome a manifestation as Christmas because it was like a second birth. It was a kind of second birth because Jesus was "christened;" christened not only with the waters of the River Jordan but by "the Spirit descending like a dove on him" (Mark 1.10).

Indeed his son-ship, or "filiation" to use the ancient Latin word for "son," *filius*, is announced by a heavenly voice speaking those majestic words from today's gospel (Mark 1.11):

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Moreover, our own divine filiation or adoption is highlighted in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It was written presumably to some of those same Ephesians whom he baptized in today's reading from the Book of Acts (Ephesians 1.3-5). It's in Ephesians that Paul declares that

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places . . . [and] destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ . . .

Of course in our tradition the way we are initiated into that adoption is through our

own experience of baptism. In that experience we hopefully hear"" or our sponsors hear"" God saying to us something like ""You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.' In that connection an older priest tells the story that on one Baptismal Sunday he shared this expression of a father's great love for his sons. So he texted his two adult sons with that very statement, "You are my beloved sons; with you I am well pleased."

He reports that one son did not respond at all. But the other one texted back something like, ""Gee dad, thanks." And then he added a nervous sounding line, ""Are you alright?' It was as if he was uncomfortable or uncertain about such an effusion of parental favor; somewhat incredulous or less than confident about his father's expression of such affection as it were strange or unusual. [See Appendix for the original internet source at: <http://forwardmovement.org/sunday-january-8-1-epiphany-the-baptism-of-our-lord.html>]

That's why in some of our services here today we baptize new Christians, and others among us reaffirm our own baptismal vows. And that's also why we remember those twelve or so believers in Ephesus, whom the apostle exhorted to exchange their baptism of repentance by John for a baptism in the name of Jesus. For in Christ we receive not only a purified conscience and forgiveness of sins but also, to repeat from Ephesians, along with our own adoption as God's children, "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

So Christian friends, Epiphany is the season in which we get to learn how the gift of the Christ child was intended to be enjoyed and received. And if we are not fully enjoying and receiving that awesome gift it need not be exchanged or refunded for something else. Rather, like those twelve believers in Ephesus we need to receive or *reclaim* the gift the way it was intended. They needed to reclaim John's baptism of repentance as a step toward Jesus' baptism by the Holy Spirit, as the scripture says:

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

[And when] Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied . . . about twelve of them.
(Acts 19.5-7)

Now that's the spiritual lesson that many of us who have African heritage have been meditating on in recent years. For several decades now it has become

popular among us to reflect on the "Sankofa' symbol" the West African symbol that means "Return and Get It." This symbol has an abstract form, like a hieroglyph, but is more popularly represented in a bird form: the Sankofa bird with its head turned backwards so that it faces its tail. And the meaning that has been most impactful among Africans and African Americans on both sides of the Atlantic is that we must look to our past in order to go forward into our future.

So how about it, Christian friends? Where do we need to look to our past in order to go forward into our future? Where do we need to we reclaim the gift we've been given; that is, actually to receive and enjoy the gift in the way it was intended? Where have we been trying to use an electric shaver the way you use a manual shaver; or a chain saw the way you use a hand saw, instead of turning the power on and using it the way it was intended?

In this Epiphany season let us reclaim all the spiritual gifts that God offers us in Christ Jesus, from his advent and manifestation as the Christ child to his Lenten passion and Easter manifestation, as the Lord of resurrection life triumphant over all forms of death and dying.

May we reclaim, receive, and enjoy these spiritual gifts in the days ahead, as we hear the scriptures and apply their meaning throughout this Epiphany season!

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

<http://adinkra.org/htmls/adinkra/sank.htm>

Cf. www.adinkra.org.uk/#/adinkra-symbols/4556469809

APPENDIX

The source of the story paraphrased above on p. 4 is the Episcopal Church daily devotional [Forward Day By Day](#) for this Sunday, January 8, 1 Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord, as follows:

Mark 1:4-11. *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

A priest colleague of mine tells the story about one year when he was preparing a sermon for the feast of the Baptism of Christ. The words of the gospel prompted him to send both of his grown sons a text message: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." He

never heard back from one son. The other son sent him a return message. "Thanks, Dad. Are you OK?"

These words, addressed to Jesus by God the Father, are words that God speaks to each one of us. Do we believe that? Or, if someone told us this, would we wonder about ulterior motives or whether that person was sane? It is so easy for us to feel that we are deficient, to focus on mistakes we've made or things we haven't done. We find it hard to believe that we are loveable. Yet God keeps coming to us, reminding us that we are beloved exactly as we are.

Many of us will renew our Baptismal Covenant today. At baptism, all of us are marked as Christ's own. Rest in an awareness of being God's beloved today . . .

PRAY for The Anglican Communion. Today is Anglican Communion Sunday.

<http://forwardmovement.org/sunday-january-8-1-epiphany-the-baptism-of-our-lord.html>