

We're in the Middle of the Twelve Days of Christmas

First Sunday of Christmas

December 30, 2018

Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

Lectionary reading: Luke 2:41-52

Luke 2:41-52 (NRSV)

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents^[a] saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"^[b] ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years,^[c] and in divine and human favor.

Our lectionary reading gets us through this period of days until we get to Epiphany next Sunday. The reading Kim just brought us is Jesus, at 12, astonishing the elders with his knowledge.

So, today's reading **does** tie-in well with the focus of today's message – the Twelve Days of Christmas.

First Jesus is TWELVE. Okay, that's a stretch.

But, more importantly, that Jesus had wisdom beyond his human years. He knew things that needed to be known...and to be taught.

Which is what I'm sharing with you today: that the old song, the Twelve Days of Christmas, is about that knowledge, too.

Hear these verses from James (1:17-18 NKJV) too.

¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. ¹⁸ Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

It's been interesting to learn that many people don't know that we are right in the middle of the 12 days of Christmas. The twelve days don't happen before Christmas but are the days AFTER Christmas...up to Epiphany when we'll hear about the Wise Men who were terrific gift givers!

So, just so *you're* confident, it's okay to continue say "Merry Christmas!" We're still in the Christmas season, the days between Christmas and Epiphany.

First off, the song the Twelve Days of Christmas is a ridiculous premise, really and you'd have to be outrageously rich to be able to pay for all the do-dads (and the repetition that comes throughout the song) to afford 12 days of Christmas. Someone recently suggested the cost for the "True Love" would be well over \$27,000!!

Makes homemade gifts sound pretty reasonable, doesn't it?

I have several articles and books about the song "Twelve Days of Christmas." Back in 1979, one of the articles said, a catholic priest suggested that there's hidden Christian meaning in the song.

We don't have proof (and some of the days could have different *meaning* depending on the source you're reading) but I thought it would make for an interesting discussion to share today.

Some internet info-decoders say the song was never intended to teach Christian doctrine but was more a memorize or forfeit game...you remembered all the lyrics or forfeited a kiss, which sounds less caustic than some of the games advertised this past Christmas.

But, that being said, the 12 days do provide coincidental ties to doctrine and could be a "catechism class with a tune. In the days when most people couldn't read or didn't have a book TO read, this song came in handy. Or, when there was religious persecution and religious teaching was forbidden.

We know that Christians have had to use "signs" to communicate and not be persecuted...like the ichthus fish symbol or the Greek letter "chi" which is shaped like an X and is the beginning of the Greek word Christ.)

The Twelve Days of Christmas could have been a way for parents to teach their children the basics of the Bible and Christianity and avoid persecution.

So, just for today's end-of-year fun, setting various interpretations aside, let's consider the song and the religious instruction it could give.

It says, in 1 John "We love God, because God first loved us."

So, can we agree that the Christmas "**True Love**" (the gift giver) is God?

Which isn't a huge stretch since God is One who gives us everything.

And that the "**me**" is the church, the people of God, you AND me?

So: on the first day of Christmas my True Love (who? _____ God) gave to me:

A partridge in a pear tree.

Which represents Jesus.

A partridge is a valiant bird – willing to do anything to protect its young; even die for them.

And that's what Jesus did for us.

At the whipping post...on the cross...Jesus did the ultimate "anything."

And even after that he fought on!

He fought out of death's grip.

The partridge's readiness to die for its young is really an accurate symbol of Jesus, who we know fights on for us even today.

Oh, and before we go on, (some of you are itching to know I'm sure) the **tree** has a couple suggestions of meanings.

One is that it is the tree in Eden.

The other is to remember that sometimes the **cross** is called the tree.

I like this idea as the cross is where Jesus gave us the greatest gift of all: our forgiveness.

Moving on:

On the 2nd day of Christmas, there are two turtle doves which point to the two parts of the Bible, the **Old and New Testaments**.

Great gift those two parts...where the promised messiah is hinted about in the OT and then the fulfillment of the promise comes in the NT.

On the 3rd day of Christmas came three French hens which were quite expensive back in the day. Those three feathered gifts could be a reference to three things mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13: **faith, hope and love.**

Faith is being sure of what we hope for.

Hope is what God gives us through Jesus.

And love is why God has done all that God has done for us. Priceless!

Four calling birds came on the 4th day of Christmas.

There are four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wherein Jesus' life is recorded.

It says in John's gospel:

“And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Like birds calling out with distinctive voices, the four gospels told of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Not a bad start to the song, don't you think?

And consider, about YOURSELF, to be a voice sharing!

Don't be silent in a loud world!

Then we get to the five golden rings.

Rings are among the most valuable and treasured gifts....engagement rings, weddings bands, even class rings hold value for us, don't they?

And they're to be treated with honor and reverence.

The reference to five brings to mind, especially for our Jewish heritage, the books of the Torah (or Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These are the books where God's great plan for saving humanity is recorded. And we consider them invaluable.

On the 6th day of Christmas comes the beginning of the waterfowl – six geese a laying.

Remember that an egg is a symbol of new life; especially at Eastertime.

The reference to SIX is about the six days of the newness of Creation. God took those days to make the world and all things in it.

But consider this:

Have you ever observed a gander (male goose) caring for his goslings?

God cares for Creation like a protective gander...with fierce protection and a sustaining love!

The creative hand of God hung the sun and moon and stars and said “stay there” and they don’t fall!

It also says in Jude that God is *“able to keep [us] from falling [so that we can be presented] faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy...”*

Then comes seven swans a-swimming.

There are a couple options for doctrine here.

When this song was written, Catholicism was the predominant religious denomination. Catholic church has seven sacraments (including the TWO we observe in the United Methodist denomination – Baptism and Holy Communion.)

Another Christian doctrine – one that’s cross-denominational – is that there are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in Romans. Remember them?

Prophecy

Serving

Teaching

Preaching

Giving

Leadership

And showing mercy.

You can look them up at Romans 12:5-8.

Either way we look at it: just as a baby swan grows and changes from being ugly duckling into a beautiful, graceful bird, so do we, as God’s children grow in our sacraments and the gifts of the Spirit.

On the 8th day of Christmas my True Love gave to me: Eight maids a-milking.
What do you guess is the number of Beatitudes that Jesus taught the crowd of followers in the Sermon on the Mount?

EIGHT!

These unique teachings (that turn the world's thinking upside down) nurture and strengthen us as much as milk that nourishes us.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
Those who mourn
The meek
Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
Blessed are the merciful
The pure in heart
The peacemakers
And those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

The word "blessed" means a *spiritual joy and satisfaction that lasts REGARDLESS of conditions or circumstances*. To be able to say, in the tough spots of our lives, "I am blessed!"

Are you beginning to understand how the Twelve Days of Christmas could be a catechism of teaching?

Let's finish up.

My True Love gave to me: Nine ladies dancing.

These are the nine things listed in Galatians, chapter 5, that are the **fruit of the Spirit**: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These are the fruits of our faith and should be evident in our lives – as signs that we are followers of Jesus.

And, oh, there won't be a quiz at the end of all of this.

But, y'all can probably guess what the TEN lords a-leaping refers to.

What do you think?

Lords were men with authority to command people's obedience.

(Was that too much of a hint?)

Ten what's?

God's ten basic laws, whether we follow them well or not, still have purpose in our lives!

The Ten Commandments guide our lives as we live in ways that are a response of THANKS for what Jesus did for us. And they address the two greatest commandments to Love (and serve) God and to love and serve our neighbors.

On the 11th of day Christmas, my True Love gave to me: eleven pipers piping. Seriously, by the end of the song, we can agree it begins to get a little noisy! Piping and drumming! I'm glad these verses don't have to be repeated a lot.

So, the eleven pipers help us (in this doctrine class) to remember that there were eleven disciples that stayed faithful to Jesus after Judas Iscariot betrayed Him.

They were like children who joyfully followed a piper.

These men, who were called by Jesus from the sea and from a tax collector's booth and other occupations, were the ones Jesus commissioned to spread the Gospel, the Good News about Him to the ends of the earth, and to their own martyred deaths.

And finally....last but not least....obviously, the Church (that's us) have received from our True Love/God, the twelve drummers....to beat out a steady rhythm for marchers to follow. The Apostles' Creed has twelve things that we, as Christians, profess and saw we believe.

About:

God the Father

God the Son

God the Holy Spirit

That: Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary

and was truly human

That he was crucified

That He died

That he rose from the dead on the third day

That he sits on the right hand of God the Father

That He will come again,
That all the dead will be raised
and that those who believe in Jesus will have life everlasting

That's a summary of what the articles and books said about the "hidden meaning" of the song, the Twelve Days of Christmas.

For many Christians today, the recognition of these twelve days has been lost – mostly because we don't celebrate Epiphany. Instead of THAT day, remembered for the arrival of the Wise Men with gifts, Christmas is the central (and probably retail) focus.

We don't devote a dozen days to prayer or reflection either.
And we couldn't afford, with time or checkbook to keep up 12 days of giving like the song suggests.

But, here's what we can maintain and believe.

God IS The True Love who gave...who still gives us what we need.

We believe, and say with faithful fervor, that Jesus rose from the dead and is alive in Heaven and WILL COME AGAIN...God is the Giver and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior is the gift that keeps on giving!

Amen!