

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
December 24, 2024  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus  
"The Gifts of Christmas"

Today is a day that is all about gifts. You may be surprised to hear me say that, standing here in this hour on Christmas Eve. But it is, truly, a day of gifts of immeasurable value. My inspiration for today's message began with a gift I received from a dear friend – this little book, "The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World" by Robin Wall Kimmerer. She is a botanist, plant ecologist, professor of Environmental Biology, and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation of Indigenous people.

The Serviceberry is a tree known by several different names – shadbush, juneberry, saskatoon, and sugarplum. Indigenous people use parts of the tree for medicinal purposes. It is prized for its delicious berries, popular with birds, small animals and people.

Kimmerer begins by reflecting on a gift she received – a free gift from the land, a full bucket of berries from the Serviceberry tree. Her first response to this abundance of berries is gratitude. A good response, of course, but not enough. True gratitude for a gift goes beyond a simple "thank you" and leads to the desire to return gift for gift. She imagines how she might return to the earth the gift of the fruit of this tree – perhaps by weeding around the tree or by donating to the local land trust or by reducing her carbon footprint. Gift for gift – that is a "gift economy." Kimmerer writes, "Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy, and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange."

Here, today, we are invited into the gift economy of God's love. We have gathered to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God in Christ. This baby is God's gift to the human family – so greatly in need of a sign of God's saving love when Jesus was born and today – a sign of love and of hope. This little child grew into a man who lived for us and with us – the family of God's children – to show us the Way of Love. Love given, love received, love returned, and love shared. That is the gift we honor today as we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

In a few minutes we will all be offered a token of God's abiding and abundant love – the bread and wine of Holy Communion. A small gift really – a thin wafer made of wheat and water and a little sip of wine. This small gift is a token of the Love that brought the Christ child to birth, the Love that has the power to set our hearts on fire, to guide our lives, and to fill our souls with the light that can overcome every darkness.

You may feel moved to receive this token of God's abundant love for the first time or you may have received this gift many, many times before. On this day of wonder, as far as you can, come to receive God's love like a child, with a fresh and eager and open heart. And as you gratefully receive this gift of God's love, consider what you will offer as your gift to God. Will you join in the gift exchange God longs for, giving your life and your love back to God? Will you allow and encourage God's love and your love to expand and multiply in your heart and in your life so that love flows freely to you and through you and from you? What might you do to make this love visible and tangible and real? Perhaps a phone call to a neighbor or the purchase of a toothbrush for our Youth Group's collection for the Community Fridge. Or a donation to support the work of Doctors Without Borders so an injured child far from here can be helped by medical professionals who are voluntarily offering their skills? Or a commitment to protect God's creation by recycling or consuming less? There are so many ways that love can be exchanged in a gift economy. As you consider God's love for you, is there a promise you feel moved to make to God?

This Christmas my hope is that we can all open our hearts to receive the gift of the Christ Child and let the gifts of our love and our lives flow back to God and to God's people and to all God's good creation, with generosity and with joy. All for the love of the Holy Child whose birth we honor today. Amen.