

“We” (Matthew 2:1-12)

Epiphany Sunday, January 4, 2009

Back in 1978, when the first green hymnal arrived in the mail, a few of us did a quick search to see which hymns made it and which ones didn't. The results were interesting. A bunch of hymns got in that we had never heard of, and then again, some of our old favorites got dropped – like “We Three Kings Of Orient Are.” Now, we knew there were theological reasons why some old favorites were dropped, but “We Three Kings”? What could possibly be wrong with it? So we asked our music director, thinking he too would be stumped, but to our surprise, he ticked off a whole list of things that were wrong – just in the first line. “For starters,” he said, “they weren't kings; they were wisemen. And they weren't from the Orient per se; more likely Mesopotamia. And we're not even sure there were three of them; that number comes from the number of gifts.” “Okay, okay” we said. “No three, no kings, no Orient. Guess all that leaves is the ‘we’ part.” Now, this was meant as a joke, but apparently a lame one, for it went right over his head. With a totally straight face he assured us, “Yes, the ‘we’ part is true.”

Isn't it funny how conversations like that come back to you? Especially that comment about the “we” part. At the time, that seemed so unimportant! But you know, the more I think about it, the more I believe the “we” part was actually quite important. In fact, I believe it was essential for getting those wisemen all the way to Bethlehem – their willingness to think in terms of “we.”

Just consider. Each one of those wisemen had a lot going for him. Each one of them was the cream of the crop, the best and the brightest, top-notch, top-rank, top-drawer. But when you have all that going for you, there's a built-in temptation that can work against you. Thinking you automatically know best. Thinking you can handle things on your own. In short, thinking in terms of “me, myself, and I” instead of “we.” But for the wisemen, that kind of attitude would have been disastrous. Individually, they didn't have all it took to reach their goal. They needed to pool their resources as creatively as they could and work as a team – which meant that, even with a star to guide them, they had to be willing to communicate, collaborate, compromise, and value each others' contributions. Somehow, they did that! So not only do I believe the wisemen had to have had the right kind of attitude, I believe that's what proved they were “wisemen” and not just “smart guys” – their willingness to think in terms of “we.”

These days, too, it is important to think in terms of “we,” and nowhere is it more important than in the life and mission of a congregation – like ours. However smart each member may be – however gifted, talented, creative, spiritual, or strong – we won't go very far with each one trying to get along on his or her own terms. Even with the brightest star to guide you, there is no substitute for teamwork. Even with a super-star to guide you, each member still needs to communicate, collaborate, compromise, and value each others' contributions. That is essential if we want to go the distance and reach our goal. We need to think in terms of “we.”

Now, a wise person knows this. A wise person knows there are limits to what one person can accomplish, that pooled resources are the richest resources, and that there are times when even a leader must be willing to follow. When such is the case, a wise person knows also that following is never just a passive thing. To the contrary, it requires many active choices. Communicating is an active choice, and when necessary, so is biting the tongue. Collaborating is an active choice, and when necessary, so is showing initiative. Compromising is an active choice, and when necessary, so is standing your ground. Valuing each others' contributions is an active choice, and when necessary, so is drawing out others' contributions, encouraging others to use their talents, and even being patient with some trial and error. Yes, a wise person knows all this and operates accordingly. "Me, myself, and I" may be able to do a lot, but effective mission, effective service, effective following of Christ requires something more: willingness to think in terms of "we."

Just to illustrate, imagine some of the issues that could have come up among the wisemen. Once they spotted the star, for instance, even assuming they all agreed on its meaning, they still had to decide whether to follow it, and when to depart, and which route to take, and what to bring with them – just for starters. There were all kinds of possibilities for dissension! Can't you just hear it now?

- "What do you mean we're taking the imperial highway to Judea? I've always taken the back roads. So did my parents, and my parents' parents. Are you saying that all this time we've been *wrong*?" Or...
- "What do you mean you need to take three camels and ten servants? Are you crazy? That's way too much trouble and expense!" Or...
- "You're bringing *what* for the newborn king? Frankincense? Myrrh? What's he going to do with them? If you had more class, you'd realize that gold is the only gift that's truly appropriate!"

You get the point. Of course, you may think: *This just shows the need for good leadership.* And no doubt, it does. But even if one of the wisemen took charge, think how that could backfire without willingness to think in terms of "we"! Imagine Gaspar shouting, *"Enough debate! We are going to take the imperial highway. We are going to get along with two camels each. And we are going to three gifts as planned. Deal with it! We leave at sunrise!"*

Can't you just predict the others' reaction? [*sarcastically*] *We leave at sunrise!* Behind the back, of course. Sure, they may go along, but they'll drag their feet. And should things go wrong: *I could have told you this would happen. But no! You had to do it your way!* Uh huh. This approach could definitely backfire!

Of course, we might expect another wise man to show positive more leadership – like a "pied piper." But would that work? This time, suppose it's Melchior: *"Hey, guys! Let's not waste time arguing. There's the star! There's the road! And just think what awaits us! This is going to be so fun, so exciting, and so life-changing! So what are we waiting for? Let's go!"*

This approach might be a little better, but it would have its problems, too. On the one hand, it takes an awful lot of energy for a leader to stay that perky! And when the leader lets down – oh, what a disappointment! On the other hand, even if the leader does stay that perky, it kind of wears thin after a while, may even feel manipulative. For when you're going the distance, it isn't always fun. It isn't always exciting. And even if it is life-changing, it doesn't always feel that way at the time. Sooner or later, we'd probably hear the others grumble, "*If I hear Mr. Personality say one more time, 'Come on, it's going to be fun!' I may well throttle him!*" So this approach would have its problems, too.

Of course, yet another wise man could try a more intellectual approach. This time, suppose it's Balthazar. "*Gentlemen, having studied every existing map of our route, and having interviewed every person known to have travelled it, I have concluded that the back roads are in fact our safest bet. Let me now spell out 157 reasons why I am right, not necessarily in order of importance.*"

Balthazar may be a smart guy. And his research may be exhaustive. And by the time he gets to reason #13, the others may well be ready to do things his way. I mean, there's only so much even a wise man can take! But however brilliant his presentation, all he really will have done is wear the others down with a flood of information. And when people are worn down like that, they may not feel up to sharing additional information that seem trivial in comparison – like the fact, maybe, that the road in question, however superior in theory, is currently closed for construction. Or that a bridge further down is washed out. "Little" things like that. So this approach would have its problems, too!

Truth be told, any approach would have its problems – *will* have its problems – and they will be *insurmountable* problems if group members are not willing to think in terms of "we." That's where the rubber meets the road. Trying to go it alone, the individual wisemen probably wouldn't have even made it to Jerusalem. And if each had insisted on having his own way or expected the others to meet his needs, this journey would have ended even sooner. Success came from following the star together; from submerging ego and seeking Christ together. Success came from willingness to communicate, collaborate, compromise, and value each others' contributions. And when they finally reached Bethlehem, when they finally knelt before the Christ Child, I'll bet they didn't give a thought to those compromises that seemed so irksome on the road or those moments when they really had to tamp down the old "me, myself, and I." All that was nothing compared to the blessing they now experienced. Thank God they had been willing to think in terms of "we." It made all the difference then, and that's what will make the difference for our congregation today: thinking in terms of "we."

And really, isn't that what we should expect? What does it even mean to live a Christian life, if not thinking in terms of "we" instead of just "me, myself, and I"? The heart of sin is focusing on "me, myself, and I." Spiritual growth requires submerging ego and thinking in terms of "we." No doubt that is why God in His

wisdom has us baptized into a group, a body, a church, not just an individual “me, myself, and I” relationship with Him. The church is a great place for learning to think in terms of “we.” Scripture teaches clearly that we are not here to be served but to serve. Likewise, we are to **“bear one another’s burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ.”** Far from bottling up our feelings or ideas, we are to **“speak the truth in love.”** Far from leaving God’s work to others, we are to **“go make disciples of all nations.”** Far from treating worship as a matter of personal preference or convenience, we are told, **“Do not forsake meeting together, as is the habit of some...”** And what is the reason Scripture gives? Interestingly enough, it’s not just because of what “me, myself, and I” will get out of our worship. Valuable as that may be, this verse tells us to worship regularly in order to **“encourage one another.”** Encourage one another!” Now, if that isn’t thinking in terms of “we,” I don’t know what is! No Christian should have to be coaxed into doing what a Christian should do anyway. No congregation should have to depend on such methods, either. Each of us is called by the Spirit. Each of us is gifted by the Spirit. But effective mission, effective service, effective following of Christ simply requires willingness to think in terms of “we.”

To be sure, many of us do think in terms of “we.” And what a difference that makes! Why, just last summer when the Salter twins were born prematurely and certain needs were made known, how lovingly this congregation reached out to that family! How generously we made sure those needs were met! Talk about thinking in terms of “we”! But just imagine how we could cultivate that spirit further! Imagine how much more of a difference we could make!

- For instance, imagine looking around on a Sunday and noticing who is not here. *Hmmm. I think I’ll call them. See if anything is wrong. Let them know that they were missed. After all, “we” are not the same without them!*
- And while looking around the congregation, imagine you spot a few people you don’t know. *Hmmm. I think I’ll introduce myself. At least say “hi” and welcome them. “We” don’t want anyone feeling left out!*
- Or imagine looking at the sick list printed in the bulletin. *Hmmm. I really need to keep each of them in prayer. And you know what? I think I’ll send each of them a card, too. Or give some a call. Maybe even visit one or two in the hospital. After all, “we” do need to encourage one another!*
- In fact, imagine taking a moment to think about all the things that aren’t getting done – and offering to help out. *Hmmm. It sure can be hard finding people to do things. Wouldn’t I just make someone’s day if I volunteered? Besides, “we” all are responsible for making our church the best it can be!*

And yes, we are! We all are! These may seem just little things, but little things add up! Pooled together, what each of us does makes a difference! So as we journey into the year ahead, let us take our cue from the wisemen. Submerging the old “me, myself, and I,” letting the Lord and His Word guide us like a star, let us focus more on doing the Lord’s work together. Let us communicate, collaborate, compromise, and value each others’ contributions. And while we’re at it, let’s be sure we’re thinking in terms of “we.” Amen.

