

# Baggage Claim

January 5, 2013

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

It is a Sunday morning. The Thomas family is getting ready for church. They are running late. Susie Thomas can't find her socks. Daddy Thomas can't find a clean shirt. And Ricky Thomas can't find a way to get out of the headlock his older brother, Johnny, is applying to him. Mother Thomas is emptying the dryer, ironing her dress, rinsing the dishes, brushing her hair, breaking up the headlock all at the same time. By only the miracle of God's grace the family piles into their mini-van, a couple shirts left untucked, one tie that doesn't match, one head again in the vice of a headlock, and a father with his pedal to the metal trying to minimize the minutes by which the family will be late. By the time they pull into the church parking lot Susie is on the verge of tears because she did not notice the rather sizable spot on her blouse, which her brothers have only be too kind to point out and about which they have been eager to provide a rather lengthy commentary, and at the same time Mom and Dad Thomas have managed to get themselves into a moderately intense argument. Out of the van the family Thomas stumbles tucking in shirts, brushing back tears and painting on smiles. Into the sanctuary they parade greeted with a "Good Morning" from the usher and a "Don't you look nice" to Susie, who doesn't believe a word of it. Into the pews they shuffle and sit,

and with a few nudges and elbows and a couple of cold dark adult stares the All-American family settles in and is now fully prepared to worship God.

Preachers and worship leaders do themselves well when from time to time they remember that Sunday morning does not always catch people at their best. Nor does it catch them always in their most worshipful moments. There is no magic wand that gets waved over our town or our homes when Sunday morning rolls around that somehow renders us ready for worship. Fact is, the road from your house to this house is not very long and there is a certain amount of baggage we carry with us when we come to worship, some of it we manage to leave in the car -- some we check at the door, but probably most of it we bring with us into the pews. That's just the way it is. And that's probably the way it should be. Worship is the time to bring our true selves to God, all the baggage, even the dirty laundry. It's why we have prayer in worship -- prayers of confession, prayers of the people, a prayer of dedication -- all of it a time to hoist our bags up to heaven and say, "Here God, help me to deal with all this." And I think for many of us that is a lot of what worship is -- a time to connect with God, a time to be strengthened by God, a time to hand our burdens over to God. It is not untypical when people come out from worship, having been moved in some way that their comments are prefaced by the words, "I got..." I got a lot out of worship today. I got a lot out of the music. I got a lot out of your sermon. I got a good nap during your sermon. I found some peace today. And nothing makes a worship leader more grateful than when someone has found and claimed something significant in our worship. We trust it is a gift from

God and not from those who lead. Thus, may I add parenthetically, on behalf of all of us who lead worship – while we know your occasional applause is a spontaneous means of encouragement and gratitude – we are much more comfortable if you work hard to withhold your applause in worship (maybe an occasional clap for our children, of course)—but all of what we do up here is for the glory of God and so a silent thank you to the good Lord will more than suffice.

Now with all that being said – the truth is Sunday morning worship is a mixed bag, isn't it? We put on our Sunday best, but we may not necessarily bring our Sunday best. The story of the wise men from Matthew might make us think that's it's supposed to be different. All we hear about the wise men is that they brought their best. That they offered the Child gold, frankincense and myrrh. It's what they had in their baggage. The gospel writer lists the three gifts because they were precious in the times and likely had some hidden symbolism that has been lost to the ages. But the truth is – those weren't the only things in the wise men's bags! Other gifts possibly – and, of course, all the other stuff that you have to bring with you on the journey. Stuff maybe they wouldn't be inclined to offer the newborn King.

Most of you have traveled during the holidays and so you pack your gifts, but you also pack all the other stuff. And then comes that wonderful moment at airport security where your bag – of course, YOUR bag – gets flagged in the detector and now all of a sudden a complete stranger is rifling through your baggage. And if you are lucky a handful of fellow travelers are watching!

And so for the world to see there's your stuff! First, the gifts you are bringing. But then there is all the other stuff. Personal stuff. Mundane stuff. Secret stuff. Shirts and sweaters and shoes – that's not so bad. But then there's the makeup, and the prescriptions, and the dime store novel, and the little pick me up and the nightgown. And it's all mixed together.

We are a mixed bag!! And every Sunday morning that's what we bring.

You see that's the interesting thing about worship, worship is not something you just switch on come Sunday morning. It's not this feeling you can manufacture when the clock strikes 9:00. No, our worship is a result of what we have packed in our bags from week to week. If what we have packed in our bags over the last week is primarily the burdens of work then this will inform our worship on Sunday morning. This is what we have to offer God. If what we have packed is simply a series of mundane and trivial experience then this will show up in our worship, a very mundane experience of worship. If what we have packed is anger or stress or anxiety primarily then these will creep into our worship. Not that they shouldn't come with us into the sanctuary. We offer ourselves to God in worship, broken vessels that we are. God wants us as we are, of course. There was no baggage scanner for the nativity. But the wise men of Matthew are here to remind us of something. Mixed bags that we are, there should be, nevertheless, some attention paid to our packing! In the midst of all the stuff we bring – at the end of the day, or the hour, what we are here to bring is our gifts. We are here to give praise and thanks for the majesty and wonder and goodness of God.

In one part of our service we call it the offering. Some call it the collection – but that would be the wrong way to put it. The Church is not a collector of dues and obligations. The Church is a temple where offerings are made. Precious gifts given in response to what God has done. Attention must be paid to what we put in the offering plate. Attention must be paid as well to the hymns we sing, the prayers we pray, the greetings we give, the texts we listen to. All these are places of offering the best gifts we have.

Not unlike I suppose that very significant gift you received in some Christmas of your past. It may not have been the flashiest gift, it may not have been the trendiest gift, it may not have been the most expensive gift – but it was the most significant gift. And it was significant why? Because it revealed love through its thoughtfulness. It revealed love through its thoughtfulness. Maybe a gift like that came from a spouse or from a friend or from a child. Something that when you opened it – you knew right away of how precious it was. My desk in my office has two prize gifts I got at Christmastime, the materials of which cost no more than \$3. But it was the time and the great care that went into those gifts by my early childhood daughter – that made them into the gifts of significance. Love revealed through thoughtfulness.

It's what the wise men packed before they started their journey – gold, frankincense and myrrh. First things into the bag, along with all the other stuff. Significant gifts that meant something. Love revealed through thoughtful choice. And so for the wise men, worship was far less about what they "got" – and more about what they gave.

So it is good that we begin the year at table with our Lord. The gifts of God for the people of God. This is no afterthought before us. This is no \$1 bill slipped into the offering plate. This is not a rush out to Wal-Mart on Christmas Eve. This is the God who thought to give deepest and most personal of all. A thought that began at the beginning of time. It cannot be mistaken for anything but the purest of love. This is significant.

And so with all the stuff we've already stuffed into our bag – and have yet to stuff into our bag – what might this year look like if we paid a little more attention to our packing? And brought before the sacrificial king – something that means something. Something significant. Love unmistakable in its thoughtfulness.