

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
(First Sunday after Christmas) The Holy Name, Year A, January 1, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“The Twelve Days of Christmas”

“On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me, a Partridge in a Pear Tree.” Isn’t this a fun song, especially as we sing it backwards counting down all the days and their gifts? “12 Drummers Drumming, 11 Pipers Piping, 10 Lords-a-Leaping, 9 Ladies Dancing, 8 Maids-a-Milking (that’s today), 7 Swans-a-Swimming, 6 Geese-a-Laying, 5 Go-old Rings, 4 Calling Birds, 3 French Hens, 2 Turtle Doves, and a Partridge in a Pear Tree.” I’ve discovered that many people mistakenly think the song is a count-down of the last 12 shopping days before Christmas; but I hope you know it is the 12 days of the Christmas season beginning on Christmas day and lasting until the day before Epiphany, on January 6. Have you ever figured the number of gifts that it would amount to? 78

Unfortunately, the song doesn’t have any kind of religious message (despite what you may have seen on the internet about coded Roman Catholic symbolism in Protestant England); but as I thought about the song’s lyrics that each of the gifts are what “my true love sent to me” it occurred to me that perhaps there is a way to help us continue the true Christian Christmas spirit for the full 12 days of the Christmas season by remembering our true love, Christ, whose Nativity we continue to celebrate for three more days of the Christmas season, as the greatest gift of all, but also the so many other gifts that God has given us. So, I got to thinking about making up my own list, and here’s my stab at a different list of 12 days of gifts, all sent to us from our true love.

Day 1 – one God; reminding us that the creator of the universe is the same God who knows us each by name, and promises to hold us in the palm of his hand throughout this life and throughout all of eternity; one God who favors no people, tribe, or language, but offers his gift of salvation to everyone.

Day 2 – two Testaments, traditionally the Old and the New, or more properly the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures of the Bible; reminding us that God has been working powerfully for centuries before our lifetime, and that by reading, studying, and praying through these scriptures, we can learn to recognize how God continues his work about us and through us even now.

Day 3 – three persons of the Holy Trinity; reminding us that God offers us a multiplicity of ways to relate to him personally: as our creator and the sustainer of the natural world; as Jesus our brother who walked upon this earth to teach us how to live and to give his life for us; and as Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

Day 4 – the four evangelists of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; each of them gives a different picture of Jesus; Mark the earliest, simplest, and more human side of Jesus; John the latest, most complex, and more divine side of Jesus; between them there are significant differences; reminding us that the entire Bible not only presents but invites multiple perspectives of how we understand our faith; we have to be careful about squeezing God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit into any too narrowly-defined human concepts.

Day 5 – five loaves. along with the fishes, with which Jesus miraculously feeds thousands of people; reminding us of God’s bounty in supplying us not only our daily bread, but a lot more than that.

Day 6 – six days of creation; reminding us that all of God’s creation was judged by God to be “very good”, and that if we do our work with God in mind all that we undertake will be as co-creators with God, giving our activities a great dignity and purpose.

Day 7 – seventh day of creation, unlike the others, a day of rest and Sabbath; reminding us of the importance of slowing down, putting aside our cares, to be still, knowing that we are in the presence of God; whether we take the time to do that on the Sabbath, or whenever else we can find the time to be apart with God.

Day 8 – eight days of Hanukkah (this year Dec. 25-Jan. 1, so today is the final day of Hanukkah); it doesn’t always coincide so much with our Christmas season; the daily lighting of eight successive candles on the Hanukkah menorah is very similar to our weekly lighting of four successive candles on the Advent wreath reminding us of our family of faith connection to Judaism; that without Judaism there would never have been a Christianity; and that we share many values and concepts of faith with each other; and even more so this year as today is the Feast of the Holy Name, when, on the eighth day, as prescribed by Jewish law, Jesus had his circumcision and naming; Jesus wasn’t officially “Jesus” until this ceremony; and to overlay one more holiday, which also involves the daily lighting of candles, today is the eighth and final day of Kwanzaa, and this is the 50th anniversary year since the creation of this pan-African celebration of family, community, and

culture; this final day of it is dedicated to the importance of faith; so be aware of the many celebrations that are happening today among our brothers and sisters

Day 9 – nine fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22 – faithfulness, generosity, joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control); we could all use a healthy dose of these gifts, couldn't we?; reminding us that the Spirit gives every one of us different gifts to guide, instruct, and empower us for ministry and for building up God's kingdom on earth.

Day 10 – Ten Commandments; reminding us first of the importance of our responsibilities to God, and next of our responsibilities to our families and to our neighbors.

Day 11 – eleven faithful disciples; reminding us that each and every one of us has a different personality, skills, and energy to bring to the group of us disciples living today who are continuing God's work in the world.

Day 12 – twelfth disciple, Judas; reminding us that even when we fail to live up to our commitments, God is forgiving. If you have any doubt that Judas was forgiven, remember the words we say every time we have Holy Communion (and this wording is in every version of the Eucharistic Prayer), "Drink this, all of you;" words that were spoken (Matthew 26:27) after Jesus had revealed that Judas would betray him, yet while Judas was still at the table with Jesus and the other disciples. It is reassuring to know that no matter what sins and shortcomings we do have, we are still welcome at God's table.

There might be better numbered items you can think of to associate with each of these 12 days of Christmas; I'm not sure how singable my version is: "5 Loaves of bread..., 4 evangelists, 3 Persons of the Trinity, 2 Testaments, and 1 Go-od o-over all"; but you get the idea; all of these things listed are amazing gifts from God, and there are so many other gifts from God too; Christmas is important enough to stretch out for the full 12 days of the Christmas season, so after all the other gifts have been given and received, keep the greatest gifts closest to your heart: all of our gifts from God; the gifts from our true love.