

“THE DOZEN DAYS OF CHRISTMAS,” A Sermon by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul Untied Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, January 2, 2021

Congregation, I don't know if you're counting. But today we gather for Sunday worship on the ninth day of Christmas. For the Christmas season there's officially just three more days to go. Ironic, isn't it? We wait so long so long for Christmas and it's over so quickly. In fact, in the Christian calendar Christmas is the shortest season of all. Pentecost lasts for almost six months. Lent, Easter, and Epiphany range between six-and-a-half to eight weeks long. Advent is a full month of Sundays. Yet Christmas extends just twelve days. It starts with Jesus' birth which we begin to celebrate as the sun goes down the day before. Christmas then continues to January 6th, which is known as Three Kings Day. That observance inaugurates the fresh season of Epiphany, symbolized by the Wise Men and the star they followed from their homes in the East.

I count it as consolation that at least in the church we allot Christmas those dozen days. In the secular world, Christmas more quickly gets lost in New Year's celebrations. Perhaps the shortness of the Christmas season should make it all the more precious to us. I know that I like to hold onto it. In fact at the parsonage next door we rarely take down our Christmas decorations until the near dawn of Lent, which gives us more time to enjoy them, cherishing their symbolic message.

One memorable song that has definitely helped generate wider recognition of Christmas as more than a day is aptly entitled “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” You've heard it. We've all heard it—tune and words. The song opens with the words: “On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me...” It finishes:

Twelve drummers drumming.

Eleven pipers piping.

Ten lords a leaping.

Nine ladies dancing

Eight maids a milking.

Seven swans a swimming.

Six geese a laying.

Five golden rings.

Four calling birds.

Three French hens.

Two turtle doves.

And a partridge in a pear tree!

The song is so light-hearted that it seems almost contemporary. However, it is actually a very old French carol which can be traced all the way back to the 1500s—about the time of Martin Luther's life and the launch of the Protestant Reformation.

Those who study hymns and carols speculate that it was first composed as a kind of choral game or contest for Twelfth Night celebrations in France. In other words, for those gathering to mark the end of the Christmas season and the start of Epiphany. Apparently, building up to all twelve gifts mentioned by the carol, a song leader would offer one fresh verse after another, adding one more gift each time. Thereafter in what was really a competition, other singers present, perhaps performing as small groups or choral ensembles, had to recall and recite in song all the gifts already given. Any singer or choral ensemble that could chant the entire list of gifts, one to twelve, without missing a beat or omitting any, received a prize. Conversely, those who forgot or stumbled over the list of gifts in their recital had to drop out of the competition and perhaps even forfeit something.

Early on, the litany of gifts recited in the song may have varied from locale to locale. There could well have been a lot of improvisation. Yet as the “Twelve Days of Christmas” carol gained traction across France and crossed borders to England and other lands, its words appear to have solidified pretty much into the version that is familiar for us today. The carol was preserved for all time in a collection of songs entitled *Mirth Without Mischief*, published in 1789. What an appropriate name for a songbook that includes the “Twelve Days of Christmas” carol!

Mirth is a state of a state of merriment, where we give ourselves over to gladness, joy, and laughter. “The Twelve Days of Christmas” is the kind of carol that can bring a smile to our faces. Some carols talk about joy. But this is carol that evokes joy, making it a blessing for us in a season that should be observed with as much joy as reverence.

Some have claimed for the “Twelve Days of Christmas” hidden meaning in all the numbers. The partridge, for instance, has been identified as Jesus, the alpha and omega of our faith. The two turtle doves are said to represent the Old and New Testaments. Those three French hens serve as symbols of the faith, hope, and love that the Apostle Paul presents as so central to true Christian life. (*1 Corinthians 13:13*) The four calling birds are the four apostles who lend their names to the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Likewise, the five golden rings signify the first five books of the Old Testament, attributed to Moses and known as the Pentateuch. The six laying geese reputedly stand for the six days of creation before God rested. And those seven swans swimming are reminders of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, encompassed by prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, teaching, and compassion. Meanwhile, the eight milking maids allude to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount where he successively blesses the poor in spirit; those mournful, meek, and merciful; the peacemakers and pure in heart; and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and are persecuted for it. (*Matthew 5:3-12*) Of course, nine ladies dancing may not sound very religious but to them has been assigned the “fruits of the spirit.” The Apostle Paul actually lists them for us in his Letter to the

Galatians as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (*Galatians 5:22-23*) Ever since they have been cherished virtues in Christian life. Ten leaping lords offer us an equally fanciful scene but apparently with serious purpose, if symbolism is inferred. Together, they are said to serve as emblems of the Ten Commandments which Moses received from God on behalf of the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai. Finally, eleven pipers piping and twelve drummers drumming respectively stand for Jesus' eleven apostles after Judas' death and the twelve points of doctrine found in the Apostles' Creed, which we recite today. If each enumerated association is credited as true, all this adds up to a rich load of symbolism, suggesting a lot more seriousness to a carol that on the surface just seems to be fun. What do you think? Personally, I find it all thought-provoking even if the litany of spiritual symbolism and meanings claimed was actually imputed to the carol well after the fact of its original creation.

Intended just for fun has been a very different approach taken to the "Twelve Days of Christmas" by the PNC Bank, which has a branch right across the street where our church does business. Proving that bankers don't have to be Scrooges at Christmas, the PNC finance staff as a whimsical, tongue-in-cheek public service annually researches what it might monetarily cost to give our "true love" each of the gifts contemplated by the carol. They call it their "Christmas Price Index." In this vein, not considering current labor shortages and price inflation due to supply problems caused by our pandemic, they have estimated that ten bona-fide leaping lords, hired for a performance, would run at least \$11,260. Nine dancing ladies could be a little less expensive, costing \$7,552.

Much more reasonable to the pocket-book might be twelve drummers at \$3,183 and eleven piping pipers at \$2,943. Although it sounds a little unfair and raises the question of pay equity, eight milking maids come cheaply. They can be obtained for a mere \$58! Meanwhile, since the price of gold has not soared nearly as much as it might have in these difficult times, five gold rings can probably be secured for \$895. At the same time, it turns out that the cost of birds varies hugely. While seven swimming swans are priced at \$13,125, six geese and four calling birds are available in the \$600 range, and two turtle doves can be obtained at \$450. Considerably more modest in cost are the three French hens at \$255. And a partridge in a pear tree can likely be acquired for under \$225. The basic bill for all this would be \$41,205. However, if the "Twelve Days of Christmas" is taken more literally with mounting repeat gifts day-by-day, our tab would reach \$179,454. That's a tidy sum. I hope no one is going to put that on their charge card. That would make for a terrible Christmas hangover.

If all this sounds outlandish and absurd, well it is! Like the carol itself, the bankers' price index underscores that we can become too materialistic at Christmas. Actually, what I do like most about "The Twelve Days of Christmas" carol is its emphasis on giving. In an

entertaining way, the carol is testimony to the fact that when we truly love someone we want to give and give and give.

As we especially realize at Christmas with the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, God is like this with us. Yes, God gives and gives and gives. After the original gift of creation described in the Book of Genesis, he sends prophet after prophet into the world to help us redeem our lives from destructive selfishness and sin. And when that isn't enough to convince and sway us, he gives us the gift of his own son to be our savior. The gift comes wrapped in swaddling clothes in the Bethlehem manger. In turn, God's son Jesus is a savior who gives and gives and gives. Besides sharing with us his ministry of teaching and healing, he sacrifices his life for us on Calvary's cross. Moreover, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, he continues to give us his presence, his guidance, his help.

Of course, all this is shared with us with the hope and expectation that we will learn to give and give and give in return. And in our gift-giving what matters most are the kinds of gifts that God and Jesus impart to us—namely, the gifts of peace, hope, and love which go hand-in-hand with being a people of faith and may be cleverly commemorated by our “Twelve Days” carol.

I am sure that there are many material gifts that are almost always welcome at Christmas. Fragrances are very nice. So are kitchen appliances and power tools that add convenience to our lives. A tie or a sweater is thoughtful and invariably appreciated. Yet who among us does not value even more greatly the love of family, the loyalty of friends, a positive word from a boss or employer for a job well done, a helping hand from a neighbor, and even the kindness of a stranger when we find ourselves distressed and in a terrible bind? These are the most wonderful gifts to give—whether during the dozen days of Christmas or in any season of the year.

Some gifts rust, tarnish, or fade. Others wear out, break down, or get used up. Yet the gifts of the spirit last and last, never losing their sheen or luster, never diminishing in power and value. Frankly, I can't remember all the material gifts that I have received over the years at Christmas. Can you? But I don't think I have ever forgotten the people who in the true spirit of Christ have given me the gift of their sincere and caring presence. How I cherish those who have gone out of their way to hear me out and help me out... Those who have laughed with me or consoled me when I was ready to cry... Those who have loved me when I felt least lovable and most vulnerable after making mistakes.

In his gospel ministry Jesus says that the measure we give will be the measure we get. (*Mark 4:24*) But he's not encouraging tit for tat. Instead, quite differently, Jesus is calling us to real generosity—to be the most giving, sharing people that we can be and not just at Christmas. When we are generous, just as Jesus wants us to be, we discover anew that in giving we receive and are most blessed. In fact, as Jesus explains to all disciples with

ears to hear, those who give and share to the point of great personal sacrifice will receive in return a “hundredfold more in this time...and in the age to come eternal life.” (*Mark 10:30*) That’s a better bonanza than anything to be found under a Christmas tree.

In the remaining days of the Christmas season and in the weeks of Epiphany to come, commemorating the three kings who brought their gifts to the Christ Child, let’s remember that as the beloved children of a God who gives so much and as disciples of one who laid his life down for us what’s really important in life. For us as Christian men and women, our lives should be about “true love” expressed in caring, giving, and sharing. And not just for a seasonal twelve days. But throughout the year.

Amen.