

Epiphany - Matthew 2:1-12

A helicopter was flying above Seattle, Washington when an electrical malfunction disabled all the aircraft's electronic navigation and communications equipment. Due to the clouds and haze, the pilot could not determine the helicopter's position and course to steer to the airport.

The pilot saw a tall building, flew toward it, circled, drew a handwritten sign, and held it in the helicopter's window. The pilot's sign said, "Where am I?" in large letters.

People in the tall building quickly responded to the aircraft, drew a large sign, and held it in a building window. Their sign said, "You are in a helicopter." The pilot smiled, waved, looked at his map, determined the course to steer to Sea-Tac airport, and landed safely.

After they were on the ground, the co-pilot asked the pilot how the "You are in a helicopter" sign helped determine their position. The pilot responded, "I knew that had to be the Microsoft building because, similar to their help-lines, they gave me a technically correct but completely useless answer."

There are many lessons we could learn from the story of the Magi in today's gospel.

We could point to their courage for beginning the journey, we could point to their perseverance in bringing it to completion, or we could point to their faith in seeking out the Christ child.

But today I would like to focus on a quality that is every bit as important as the ones I just mentioned and also more relevant to our lives. That quality is the virtue of **dependence**.

For all their skills and resources, the wise men were dependent on forces outside of themselves. They depended on the star, which led them to Jerusalem. They depended on Herod and his advisors who sent them to Bethlehem. They depended on the message they heard in a dream that sent them home by another road.

As wise as they were, the Magi could never have made their journey alone. They would have never found the newborn King of the Jews if they did not have the virtue of **dependence**.

Now it might seem strange to call dependence a virtue. But what is a virtue? It's a good habit, a tendency to do a good thing. Dependence can be a very good thing.

This may sound peculiar to us because we live in a culture that extols **independence** as the highest of good things. We all want to be self-sufficient. We all want to make our own decisions, care for our own needs, determine our own future.

And there is nothing wrong with any of these desires. Being independent is a value.

But because we so extol the value of independence, it makes the value of **dependence** more difficult to see.

Frequently, people who are aging want to assert their self-sufficiency. They say, "I don't want to be dependent on others. I don't want to be a burden on my children. I don't want to ask of others for the things that I need."

Now I sympathize with all those desires. I don't want to be a burden either. But when we only look at the value of being independent, we can easily overlook the goodness that is also present in **dependency**.

There is a value, and even a beauty, in realizing that we have needs and that there are people in our lives who are able and even eager to meet those needs.

When I meet with families planning funerals, they mention how a spouse or a parent valued his or her independence. “Dad was always giving to others but he would never let us give to him. Mary was always doing things for others, but she was unable to receive what we wanted to offer her.”

As comments such as these are made, there is usually a certain note of sadness or regret. The speakers point to a lost opportunity. They realize how much deeper the relationship could have been, if only the deceased parent or spouse had been willing to be more **dependent**, willing to open themselves more to love.

There is nothing wrong with self-sufficiency but when that self-sufficiency is pushed to an extreme, it can lead to isolation. It can cut us off from those who wish to love us.

Behind such extreme self-sufficiency lies a sinful pride that says, “I can do things on my own. I really don’t need anyone else.” This is why dependency is a virtue.

The person who is **dependent** possesses an honest humility that knows, “I am not complete in myself. I cannot meet all of my needs. I need to have the freedom to ask others for help.”

When that humble humility is exercised, it provides an opportunity for others to love us. It can deepen the relationships with our families and friends. It can lead us to a deeper sense of gratitude for the people God has placed in our lives.

In a society that sees independence as the highest of goods, the story of the Magi reminds us that **dependence** is a virtue.

There is no shame in knowing our needs and asking for help.
The three gifts that the Magi gave the Christ child were gold,
frankincense and myrrh.

If we follow the Magi's example, they can offer us the gifts of
dependence, humility and gratitude.

AMEN.