**On Giving**

One of my favorite books is Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*. It’s about the difficulties of being an artist in the contemporary world, because it’s hard to put a price on the labor of art, and we live in a world where everything has a price. Hyde thinks of inspiration and talent as gifts, but also considers the ways all kinds of gifts have been given and received throughout time and around the world. One source he considers are folk and fairy tales.

Hyde believes that the Grimm fairy tale “The Elves and the Shoemaker” <http://www.authorama.com/grimms-fairy-tales-39.html> is a parable about being a gifted person. He notes that the story begins with the stirrings of a gift inside the shoemaker — when he could potentially be successful, but isn’t yet — and it ends with the gift’s release, when the gift of his talent truly becomes his own. The elves are the carriers of the shoemaker’s talent, and his gift develops gradually, each night as the shoemaker sleeps. Hyde points out that an important step in the gift coming to belong to the shoemaker (and in the elves’ eventual freedom) is that the shoemaker sees and acknowledges the naked elves who have been slipping into his cottage at night to make the shoes; in fact, the first shoes we see the shoemaker make are for the elves. After the shoemaker and his wife have made outfits and shoes for the elves, the elves are freed, and the shoemaker is prosperous until the end of his life.

Hyde says that when we’ve been given a gift, we are grateful, and we labor to make ourselves worthy of it. Once we have truly made that gift our own, we feel the urge to pass it on, and we do. I’ve been thinking about Hyde’s take on “The Elves and the Shoemakers” ever since we started our conversation on generosity at Saint Matthew’s, and how one of the missions of our church is to invest in its members so that we can go into the world as more generous people. In this case, I see the elves as being the Holy Spirit at work. And I feel that attending Saint Matthew’s has made me a more generous person – not as much of one as I would like, but I am still growing. I learn each week from the sermons, but also from watching Karen and Rosa in the kitchen, or Maclore and Robyn in the nursery. I learn from stories I hear at coffee hour, about everyone’s work in the world.

The time I most needed the generosity of Saint Matthew’s, it was given to me. Shortly after my daughter was born, one of my milk ducts became infected by an aggressive strain of MRSA staph I’d picked up in the hospital. I had to have emergency surgery, just two weeks after an emergency c-section, and was in no condition to care for a newborn. Many people from this church prayed for us, brought us food, or came to hold our baby so that I could rest. Five years later, I have a gregarious, happy child whom I believe was shaped in part by her early weeks in the arms of this community. Technically, she wasn’t baptized until the next June, but the church claimed her as their own far earlier than that.

That’s why my family pledges to Saint Matthew’s, and why we intend to pledge more this year than we did last year. It’s not easy to pin a price on what Saint Matthew’s gives me, but I can pin a price to its water bill or roof. The church is an agent of change in me, and I want to be an agent of change in the world. I am still laboring to be worthy of the gift. But I’m already grateful.