

Gifts

Maundy Thursday

Text: Psalm 116:12,13; St. John 15:1-17

When a gift is given, one assumes that it is exactly what the word “gift” means: something that is given freely, without coercion, and not for payment, either before and after the giving of the gift. Thus, for example, if one gives a gift to the church or to the local National Public Radio station, the only thing one might expect in return is a receipt saying that no goods or services were rendered to the giver for the gift. If goods or services were received, it wouldn't be a gift but a payment, a matter of buying something, a matter of value exchanged for value.

However, as anybody with any adult experience in the real world can tell you, gifts are a little more complicated than that, and that a lot of gifts come with strings attached, whether those strings are financial or social or moral. This, of course, includes the strings of guilt.

Sometimes those strings, those expectations are spelled out and everybody is aware of them. For example, often givers of big monetary gifts to institutions have very specific expectations about what the recipients are to do with the gift; the recipients in taking the gift know they have to meet those expectations. If those expectations aren't met, the givers rightly get upset. If somebody gives a gift to a university, say, to endow a program in international studies, he ought to get upset if it is used to pay for scholarships for the music program or for any other non-international studies purpose. Indeed, a court case is being brought against Princeton University currently by the heirs of the A&P grocery fortune for precisely that reason. Their parents had endowed the Woodrow Wilson School of International Studies and they are claiming that, several years later, Princeton has been using the endowment, now worth several hundreds of millions of dollars, for other things. That expectation that gifts will be used for the purposes for

which they were given is legitimate and all institutions are honor bound, and usually legally bound to hold to the donor's wishes. That doesn't mean, however, that just because you get mad at an institution or somebody that you can demand your gift back. We have very unflattering names for people who do that, and often as a legal matter, such people need to be informed that gifts once given cannot be taken back. The operative principle here is that if you have really given a gift, then the money doesn't belong to you anymore and you have no rights over it. If you are mad, you may withhold future contributions or you may withhold your affection and good will; those are perfectly legitimate strings attached to a gift, and everybody knows it. But you usually can't expect to get the money back.

But even where there are not such concrete expectations -- and they are rare in the case of most kinds of gifts-- other kinds of reciprocity can be brought into play when gifts are given. These expected reciprocities are there at grand and small levels and are woven deep into the cultural fabric. For example, long ago among the Indians of the Pacific Northwest there used to exist what is called a "potlatch culture." The land on which they lived, and the streams and waters that were part of it, were so fertile that there was actually considerable wealth and surplus, particularly anything having to do with salmon. Thus to show off their wealth a family might give a huge feast, lasting many days, with hundreds of friends and relatives invited, all of whom not only would enjoy the feast but would be given many gifts. That was never the end of it, though, nor could it be. For all the recipients were expected then to give extravagant feasts, too, with the idea generally being that they were to outdo the original feast. This behavior, of course, has been taken up and is being repeated today by the parents of young men and women who wish to marry as weddings keep getting bigger and bigger, now costing about the same or more as a year of tuition for a private college.

Now, the point of such behavior can be shared generosity even if once in awhile it gets out of hand. However, sometimes the unwritten expectations can be malicious. We all know the term “white elephant.” By it, we mean a gift that is ugly and unwanted, although, if it comes from a favorite aunt or grandmother, one has to display it, nevertheless. In its original context, however, a white elephant signified a gift that was somewhat more problematic than that. If, for example, a rajah in India had an enemy or even an uppity courtier or relative that he wanted to put in his place, he might give that person a white elephant. Now, white elephants are very rare, and they are considered sacred; one has to treat them accordingly. So on the face of things it would appear that the recipient had just received a very rare and expensive gift. However, in order to keep such elephants in the manner to which they are accustomed, one ends up being committed to a very expensive proposition. So, while the gift of a white elephant looks like a very generous and exotic gift, it is, however, one that is pretty much destined to ruin the recipient financially. It’s modern day equivalent comes to about the same thing as giving a teenager a Mercedes but not paying for its upkeep or insurance.

That is at a grand level. But at the everyday level of pleasant social intercourse, we all recognize that gifts are often not just given, and then things are left at that. Usually gifts given are part of a system of friendly exchange, an exchange that is at the very heart of sociability. If you invite somebody to dinner, they are to reciprocate. That is often how lasting friendships are formed. There are also small gift exchanges that are operative in a society. For example, at some point twenty-five years or so ago, everybody who was invited to dinner at the house of friends started bringing a bottle of wine to their hosts. That they are still bringing them indicates to me that the social obligations entailed by receiving one of these bottles have caught everybody in the country in a large web of wine giving, although I sometimes suspect that some people believe

that by giving a bottle of wine they are discharged from the obligation of repaying the dinner invitation.

Now, the good or bad of these systems of gifts, of mutual expectations, and of exchange depends largely on the economy, as it were, that it fosters. The system of conspicuous consumption, of “outdoing the Joneses,” is a trap that is bad economy, financially and morally. Trying to outspend others on cars, houses, jewelry, clothes, and the like just to show that you can, or contributing to a system of exchange in which pointless acquisition and spending is the rule, promotes an unstable fiscal economy, moral frivolousness, shallow morals, and general tackiness in taste, even if the taste is expensive. That sort of economy has spiritual emptiness in its soul, and leads to narcissism. In such an economy other people don’t really count except as burdens, an audience or as opportunities for self advancement. Such an economy can even be vicious under the guise of graciousness. But that isn’t the only possible economy of gifts. On the other hand, the giving of gifts can come from real generosity, and it can promote a culture of generosity. Gifts given in this sort of culture are truly gracious for they come from the heart, and are received by the heart, and are ultimately passed on to others out of the same spirit of generosity with which they were first given. They open up moral space and don’t close it down. Everybody benefits in spiritual and moral ways when gifts are given in this way.

As we now approach the Lord’s Supper, it is important to understand this about gifts for the Lord’s Supper is just such a generous gift, and fosters just such a generous and spiritual economy. For what we do here in keeping the memorial that Christ commanded his disciples to keep, and in making thanksgiving as he told us to do, is a matter of receiving a real gift that Christ has given us. This meal is not just a mere remembrance, a casting of our eyes backwards over two thousand years to a meal that Jesus shared with twelve disciples once upon a time. This

is an enduring gift that Jesus gave to his disciples; it is the gift of his real presence among them for as long as they keep the memorial. It is the gift that lets all of his disciples, then and now, partake, really partake of his life and his love. It is the gift of the means by which we are to keep the commandment to love one another as he loved us.

Now, theologians tell us that this gift is a gift straight out. Indeed, they want to insist that *everything* that God gives is an outright gift for everything God gives is matter of grace -- our creation, God's word, Christ's life and death, his love, his forgiveness. So, too, this gift of the Lord's Supper comes from his graciousness and is unmerited on our part. As a gift it means what the word "gift" means straight out. We can't expect it as a matter of course. We can't and don't earn it. We can't repay it, ever. Now, in stressing this gratuitousness of grace and of the gift the theologians are quite right. But, if they stop there, they have only told half the story. There are strings attached to this gift.

What are those strings? What is expected of us when we receive this gift? The psalmist himself asks that question, when he asks, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his bounty to me?" And the psalmist's answer is the simple one and the right one. For he simply says, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."

How do you give thanks for what is given to you in this meal? You eat the meal that is given to you. How do you give thanks for Christ's own presence? You take his presence into your own; you ask for his presence, you ask for what he wants to give you.

Thus there are some important reciprocities expected in taking God's gift. First of all, in eating this meal and taking this gift, you are to give back to God the gift that he has always wanted from you, namely, your love and gratitude and faith. That is only appropriate for such a great gift, and it is really a very simple matter. For love and gratitude and faith is at its heart

simply a matter of taking God at his word that he wants to do good for us. But there is something more, too. For in taking Christ's presence into your own, in letting God do the good he wants to do for you, what you are doing is letting God's life be your life. You are letting Christ become the soul of your soul and the heart of your heart. And what does that mean? That you start giving to others what you have been given. When you take the cup of salvation, and call upon the Lord, love and gift doesn't stay just with you. No, at that point you start to love one another as he loved you. At that point, you can be to your neighbor what Christ is to you. At that point, you are indeed the branches of Christ's vine, for his life has become your life, and has become the life of the church that is the unity and source of all the branches that dwell in him.

Openness, love, faith, gratitude are the strings of this gift. Those are its rewards, too, and they are at the heart of the economy that the gift sets into motion. What more could we ask for than this sort of gift that we have been given? This is the gift of continuing life, this is the gift of God that makes us children of God. So let us then do what God wants us to do when he gave this gift and his new commandment of love: let us take up then the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. Indeed, taste, and see that the Lord is good.