

Yours, Mine and Ours

John 17: 6-11

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**November 6, AD 2016
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I shouldn't be surprised but I was. The day after Halloween a store was playing Christmas music. Pressure! I talked to someone else who noted that just seeing November on the calendar makes her think of all she has to do. We're already thinking about gifts. So here's a theological Christmas question: what do you give the God who has everything?

Take it a step further. Think how hard this must be for the members of the Trinity. The Father, Son and Spirit have been together a long time. And Christmas rolls around pretty fast. What does *God* give the God who literally has everything? Imagine this conversation between the Son and the Spirit:

Can he hear us?

I don't think so; you know he turns off omniscience when we start talking about gifts.

OK, so we just have a few minutes. What are you going to give Father?

Well, I was thinking about how great Orion's belt would look if it had four stars instead of three. The new one could be a kind of blue nebula buckle. It would make that constellation really pop!

Yeah, but you gave him a nebula last year, remember? How about something more on the molecular level—I hear the trend among the angels this year is to go micro. Everyone is downsizing.

I don't know, it's just so hard to figure out what he wants!

Of course I'm being silly. Perhaps nigh unto sacrilegious. But there is a deeper truth here. According to our view of God, the entire universe exists as a gift. Why is there anything and not nothing? Here's our view of the world: Creation itself is a gift of joy that flowed forth from the love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The God who *is* love created out of love. What we know as reality is not necessary. It didn't have to be. God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit is perfect and complete in himself. The Triune God made the world out of the desire to *increase* love. Out of an overflowing delight to adorn glory with more glory. Out of love's desire to give, to create, and to bring forth. And of all the things he made for the joy of it, one creature was specifically made in his image, made above all others to reflect his glory: man and woman. We were made

to love one another and in so doing to bring forth more life. Love bringing forth life mirrors the very nature of God. God's glory is love, freely given and life-creating.

Of course we know the story. We fell into sin. We asserted our way over God's way and tarnished his image in us. Death entered the world. We became captive to sin and death, unable to save ourselves. But our plight did not daunt our ingenious God. In the fullness of time, he came down to save us. The Father sent his Son to come among us as the man Jesus Christ. He came to remake humanity back into the image of the God who is love.

In John 17, we get to overhear the prayer from Jesus the incarnate Son to his Father. And as we listen in, we discover that they are talking about us. And it's all about giving. Jesus prays for the disciples "whom you *gave* me out of the world. Yours they were, and you *gave* them to me." Jesus recalls before his Father how he *gave* to his disciples the very words his Father had *given* him to say. He goes on to pray the Father's protection on "those whom you have *given* me, for they are yours. All mine are yours and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them." The Father gave disciples to the Son. The Son taught them and cared for them and he now returns them in prayer to his Father.

So here's the answer to the question "What does God give to the God who has everything?" What God gives to God as the most interesting, cherished, splendid gift is a set of redeemed human beings. We are the gift that passes between the Father and the Son. They keep re-gifting us to each other. Only unlike the fruitcake we don't spoil in the passing. We grow shinier. More valuable. More alive.

There's lots of talk about identity these days. We keep asking "Who am I? How will I conceive of myself? How will I compose myself?" John 17 has a very intriguing answer. A message about identity that we scarcely can believe but which can transform every moment of our lives.

Who am I? I am a gift. Not to myself. I am a gift from the Father to the Son. I am a gift from the Son to the Father. The present they are giving each other in me is my salvation. My transformation from lump of clay to eternally alive child of God is a glorious gift from Father to Son and Son to Father.

And as we hear Jesus pray to his Father, we realize this is all getting worked out above our heads. We're not driving this gift exchange. The Triune God is doing it, and we just get to participate.

Oh we are so funny in our pursuit of identity today. I proudly say, "I will make myself who I want myself to be." As if I could. Oh we are so sad in our acceptance of identities placed upon us by those who want to limit us, label us or libel us. As if I am only what has been done or said to me by others and can't ever get that sticky off me. Think of how John 17 changes the whole identity discussion.

- My identity defined by *my* desires? Silly talk. My identity is defined by the Triune God's desires on my behalf.
- My identity defined by *my* work? Silly talk. My identity is defined by the work of the Son in creating salvation on my behalf.
- My identity defined by my family heritage? Laughable. Laughable if that heritage is mighty, filled with blue bloods and scholars and warriors. Laughable if that heritage is dysfunctional, filled with scoundrels, cheats, druggies and ne'er do wells. My identity is defined by the inheritance the Father has given to the Son, a legacy of claimed, redeemed human beings.
- My identity defined by my preferences, my creation of my own life, the name I win for myself or the name I sue to be called? Ridiculous! My identity is the name given to me by the Father who called me forth and gave me to the Son who justified me and presents me back to his Father as the pinnacle of his redemptive career. The result of his effort and his plan to establish a people for himself.

Imagine going through your day reveling in this identity! Who am I? I am the one who has been given as a gift to the Son by his Father. And the Son turns to me and says, "You are such a gift to me. I cherish you. I have taken away your sins. I am working out transformation in your life. Because I want to give you back to my Father all cleaned up, shined up, and participating in an eternal life of loving communion." Who am I? I am the one given by the Son back to his Father. And the Father turns to me and says, "You are such a gift to me! For my Son has cleansed you with his blood. He has restored you in my image. Your redemption gives glory to my Son for what he did. You shine with his grace and I find you splendid in him." Identity at its deepest is this: I am a gift from God to God.

Now, how can we become more aware of this reality? How can we participate in this eternal giving of love that is the heart of everything? We

become givers too. All this beautiful theology comes down to a very simple practice. Will we get into the gift exchange of the Father and the Son? Will we give him glory by giving him thanks and praise for all he has done? He delights to hear our heartfelt recognition that he is the source of all good gifts. And he delights to see us enter the sharing of our lives with others.

There are lots of ways to give to God by giving ourselves to his people. It's about entering the flow of giving and receiving and giving and receiving. If we are stingy givers of time, of kind words, of money, of service we will experience less of the glorious gifting love between Father and Son. If we are opening outwards, we will know more of the reality of the God who is love. Bless others with kind words and encouragement and you will discover more of the kindness of God. Move outward towards relationships and you will discover more of the relational love of God. Put your time and talent into play on behalf of others and discover more of what God is up to in the world.

And especially engage your money in kingdom work. It is counterintuitive but it is bedrock truth. You don't find the peace of financial freedom by hoarding. You don't find confidence about God's provision for your needs until you get into his giving stream. You don't find the joy of participating in God's kingdom until you participate financially in his work. That's just the way it is.

Every year, I spend about a third of a sermon talking about the spiritual power in financial giving. That's usually about all you need to continue as literally one of the most generous congregations in the world. Now I do have to give a disclaimer about this every year, because there are so many charlatans out there. If you're concerned that my teaching about the spiritual necessity to give money to the work of God in the world is just about feathering the nest of our church, I concede that's a fair challenge. So I have a challenge back for you. Tithe. But not here. Give ten per cent of your income back to God. But don't give a dime to this church. Give the full ten per cent off the top to wherever you think God is at work in the world. Do that for a year. See what happens. And then a year from now it would be great if you remember where you learned this secret to joy!

During the early decades of Christianity, the church in Jerusalem had become desperately impoverished and beleaguered under persecution. The apostle Paul organized a collection to relieve their suffering, and in doing so he expressed some wonderful links between giving and participating in Christ. In one of his letters, Paul described how excited the Christians in Macedonia got about contributing to this gift. He says they were "begging us earnestly for the favor of

taking part in the relief of the saints....they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us” (2 Cor. 8: 4-5). Paul knew it is a spiritual privilege to take part in the work of God in the world. The Macedonians passionately wanted to care for the Christians in Jerusalem, to be connected to them through giving.

Paul would go on to write another great spiritual principle related to giving: “You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God” (2 Cor. 9: 11-12). The financial giving to the needs of the Jerusalem Christians created spiritual worship as people gave thanks to God for his provision.

We’ve certainly experienced that here. Your church has been able to pass along more than \$400,000 to Presbyterian families and ministry partners flooded in August. The letters we’ve received in reply have tear stains of gratitude on them. Gratitude to God for how the body of Christ works. God gives. We give. Others give thanks to God because we participated in the flow of his giving. It’s what the church is all about.

God gives. We give. Others give thanks to God. The reach of your gifts to God through your church astounds me.

- From the library where I studied the Scriptures with our elders this week to the clinic in Beirut where refugees are meeting Christ,
- From the diapers changed in the nursery to youth doing flood relief,
- From the deep nourishment we get from this sanctuary to the streets of Gardere,
- From the music that resounds in our worship to the quiet prayers over the sick and homebound,
- From partnerships in mission in New Orleans, Kenya, Romania and Russia to the life giving friendships we make on this campus,

The giving God is at work in our midst. Over and over the great gift exchange occurs. Through words, through service, through worship, through fellowship. God gives. We give. Others give thanks to God.

It is no trouble at all for me to encourage you to bring your pledges next week for the work of God through our beloved church. I can also encourage you to

do what Rhonda and I do. We make a slight increase every year, just a few per cent, but it makes me feel like I am participating more in driving the mission ahead. I hardly notice it during the year, but it adds up significantly. Just a couple per cent more from all of our givers would make a substantial boost in the work we can accomplish next year. And we do indeed have so much more we want to do!

I love to give to God from what he has given me. It gives me a taste of his joy. In fact, it opens the way for me to realize more and more the stunning identity Jesus has given to his church. We are the cherished gift that the Father gave the Son. We are the redeemed, ransomed, restored gift that the Son gives back to his Father. We are the gift God gives to God to adorn his glory: a redeemed people that bears witness to the universe that God is love.