

GIFTED

Sermon for Pentecost Last C (Christ the King)-Lk. 23:33-43

LPC, 11/24/13

This time of year people are especially concerned with gifts. We have to find and buy Christmas gifts for everyone on our list: family, friends, business associates, etc. For many of us, this is no chore, combining what for some are two favorite activities: spending and generosity.

Today I'd like to talk about gifts in a couple of different contexts, beginning with the Festival of Gifts we just concluded in the Undercroft. I hope you got to see the paintings, crafts, decorations, needlework, the sculpture and the restored vintage Chevy truck tailgate. I hope you got to taste the prize-winning chili and the other delicacies offered at our Annual Congregational Dinner.

The Festival of Gifts was not just an excuse for a good time, not that we need much of one at Lawrencefield Parish Church. The Festival of Gifts grew out of an impulse to celebrate the wealth of talents and interests present in this little church. I may as well come clean: I encourage the Festival of Gifts to promote the realization that we are abundantly gifted. We are abundantly gifted as Christians; we are abundantly gifted as Lawrencefielders, and we are abundantly gifted as individuals.

Too many churches, especially in these so-called "Post-Christian" days, spend way too much time, especially during stewardship and budget seasons, talking about what they don't have enough of. There is no room for poor mouth here. If we start from the point of how gifted we are, rather than how we fall short, several wonderful things happen:

- We are more generous during stewardship and budget seasons, responding from a mindset of abundance rather than poverty.
- We are happier and more grateful. What better preparation for Thanksgiving than to be aware of how copiously we have been gifted!
- In turn, this positive attitude adds creativity to our discernment of further ministry, and the enthusiasm for current ministries.
- Enthusiasm, in turn, increases the "success" rate of our ministries.
- Finally, when we increase our awareness of our giftedness, we are following Jesus and building God's kingdom.

Now I want to talk about gift in the context of today's Gospel. Today, the Last Sunday of Pentecost, we are particularly concerned to celebrate Christ the King. You will notice that all our hymns today all make some mention of Jesus' kingship, or his crown or his reign. And yet our Gospel reading is about the crucifixion. We are simultaneously talking about Jesus' triumph and rulership over all things, and about his humiliation, torture and death.

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These would seem to be opposites, but their juxtaposition is deliberate. This is the kind of king we have. The world has never seen such a king. Jesus turns the idea of supreme ruler on its head. Jesus' power as king lies in mind-bending love.

In the act of crucifixion, as many have noted, Jesus arms were stretched apart in a posture people use when they say "this much." Jesus loves us this much. This is the greatest gift of all. God stops at nothing to love us. God even gives Godself for us.

The English mystic Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth century wrote about a series of visions she had while seriously ill. She called them "Showings." These showings focused on Jesus' Passion and crucifixion. Julian found that everything else flowed from cross. The Passion is the supreme revelation of the love God bears toward humanity, an overwhelming expression of self-giving love.

Julian goes on to provide images that stress the loving, longing involvement of God with the world. God is Father, God is mother, God encloses us, holds the world tenderly in the palm of God's hand as one would a small nut. God sees humanity through the filter of Jesus' self-giving love and in that way is able to overlook sin.

It is impossible to think of God and gift apart from one another, especially when we contemplate the cross. The crucifixion, representing as it does the giving of all for love, is the essence of Christ's kingship. This is the greatest gift of all.

Next week, we enter Advent. Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Christ: as a human baby in the Nativity event, as the transformer of hearts in our lives today, as the ultimate ruler of creation. These are all part and parcel of the same gift.

This sermon is shorter than usual. I have made my point and am ready to stop talking. But before we continue with the rest of our service today, in recognition of God's great gifts and in preparation for both Thanksgiving and the Season of Advent, I invite you to spend the next few minutes in silence considering your own giftedness, and especially, God's gift of Godself on the cross. We have been gifted indeed.