

## “ONLY THREE GIFTS”

A Sermon for Christ the King Sunday, November 26, 2017

Text: Matthew 25:14-25

Today being Christ the King Sunday, it is appropriate to give a summary of what it means to Christians that Jesus Christ is our Lord. The gospel provides a bottom-line sort of summary in the form of a narrative set on the last day in which Jesus says “this is what it is all about.” I shall set that aside at first and articulate a theory of what it is all about. Why we worship Jesus Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit.

There are three gifts, and only three gifts, for which we give thanks to God. They are these: to be; to be loved; and to love.

Three gifts, and yet they are somehow only one gift. We know better than to think that any one gift is available to us without the other two. Or rather, we sense that something is wrong when we try to take hold of one without the other two: to be, to be loved, and to love are all essential to human existence. When they fail, we go away.

We rejoice that God has given us the gift to be. We are his creatures. We owe to God’s creating power and grace the simple fact that we exist. Here we are! Not only have we come into being, in a marvelous way; but we also woke up this morning. And we value this. We shall continue to do what it takes to hold on to the gift to be.

But that is not enough. We have at times, all of us, tasted what it might be to exist without being loved—and we have decided, all of us, we don’t like it. We are glad therefore that we have this gift. We are loved!! There may be some people who really don’t love us, who don’t care whether we exist, but there are people who do. And that, friends, is what makes us appreciate the first, the gift to be. We are, and we are loved—hallelujah!

But that is not enough. We are smart enough to realize that all those other people out there need love, and that it is up to us to contribute, so that all people have that second gift. The second and third gifts are intertwined in this way. They depend on each other. It might be nice, we think sometimes, if we could somehow enjoy the gift of being loved without the bother of returning the favor. But we also know what joy there is in loving others—in being the ones who are loved the way we are loved.

The three gifts are utterly inseparable. Life without love, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13, is nothing. Merely to be, or merely to be and be loved without loving—those are empty husks. They do not deserve to continue.

Three gifts we receive from God: to be, to be loved, and to love others.

The three gifts are received by humans in the form of knowledge of God. “This is life, that they [people] know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” But this knowing is not sterile book-learning. This knowledge is experienced as gift. We know God as we know these three gifts.

We know God the Father in creation. In particular, as Luther says in the Small Catechism, in knowing that God “has made me (and all that exists) that he has given me my eyes and ears, etc.” Our being is a function of God being God the creator.

We know the Son of God in redemption; when we know that, despite everything about us that is repellent to love, God has loved us so much that he gave his only Son to die for us, so that we might no longer perish, but have eternal life. Our being loved, in a way that is beyond challenge (and therefore

unlike the love we receive on earth from each other, which is not as divinely forbearing) is a function of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We only know absolutely that we are loved when we are in Jesus Christ, because “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

We know the Spirit of God in sanctification; when we know that, despite the vagaries and fickleness of our own hearts and minds, we do love one another because Jesus has given us his Spirit, thus pouring his love for others into our hearts to displace our harshness, our judging, our criticism, our selectiveness. Our love for others has limits, but the Holy Spirit works on us to complete the creation of humanity by instilling love in us and making it flourish and grow. “We love, because he first loved us.”

The experience of the Trinitarian God is nothing else than the experience of being fully alive, which has three parts: to be, to be loved, and to love.

Today’s story is all about that. To be or not to be is the judgment at the end. These shall be, those shall not. And on whom does the judgment fall? On us, when we lack love. And, lacking love, do not have life. The creator, Jesus says, has given the act of judgment to Him, to the one who says “I love you, so that you may love others.” Jesus came that we might have all three gifts, and not live for less than that. The one who loves us and promises to pour his love into our hearts, cautions us not to settle for being loved in ourselves, but to realize that the third gift, *to love*, is also an essential component of his work in us.

This story is not a cautionary tale, threatening destruction to people who don’t act generous. It is a revelatory tale, which shows us the unity of the three gifts, all of which are gifts of God. Knowing God, knowing God has given us three gifts, knowing ourselves by knowing God—that is life. That is the kingdom. That is what it means to be in Christ.

Thanks be to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for these three gifts: to be, to be loved, and to love one another. Amen.

