

## **“God the Giver”**

1 Corinthians 4: 7-8a, Romans 11:33-36

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Today I begin a series of three sermons on giving. I was inspired by a book I read this summer called: *“Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace.”*<sup>1</sup> Our focus today is on who God is. God’s very essence is GIVING. In the two weeks following our celebration next Sunday, we will focus on Why We Give and How We Give.

**For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich!**

**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!**

**How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!**

**“Who has known the mind of the Lord?**

**Or who has been his counselor?”**

**“Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay him?”**

**For from him and through him and to him are all things.**

**To him be the glory forever! Amen.**

I apologize in advance. This first story is a spoiler for the movie *Gran Torino*. It’s worth watching even though you will hear the end.

Walt Kowalski just lost his wife of 50 years. Walt is a guy who drinks too much, smokes too much, curses too much. He’s a veteran of the Korean war. He is cranky and rigid and probably racist. He has a bunch of guns at home and he doesn’t hesitate to use them. He has a perfectly restored vintage *Gran Torino*. He has a wicked temper, and it looks like he may also have lung cancer. He hasn’t stepped foot in a church in years, except for his wife’s funeral.

Walt has some pesky neighbors. A large family of Southeast Asian immigrants who are being harassed by a local gang. In spite of his best judgment, Walt defends the family. He gives them protection. He takes the teenage son under his wing and gives him the gift of work. He gives him skills. He even gives him some of his own tools. He gets him a construction job.

The gang is so incensed by this generosity, they ramp up the hostility. I think

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf

they are jealous of the young man's good fortune. Walt ends up beating up one of them. They retaliate by kidnapping the boy's sister. Unspeakable things are done to her, and she is deposited back on her front porch, still alive.

Both her brother and Walt nearly go crazy with grief and anger. The brother is impulsive and full of revenge. He wants to "go after" them and kill them. So does Walt.

Walt sets out to do a number of uncharacteristic things.

Walt gets a haircut; he leaves a huge tip. He orders a tailor-made suit. He goes to confession. He ties up his dog on the neighbor's front porch.

It is just after dark when Walt goes over to the gang house. He stands in the glow of a streetlight. The gang begins to taunt him. Neighbors gather at their windows. Walt calls out to them, asking for a light. They mock him. As he reaches into his coat, they gun him down. He is shot multiple times by all four of them. Lots of neighbors witness the murder. Turns out, he didn't even have a gun.

*"Greater love has no man than this: that a man give up his life for his friend."*

Walt is a Christ-figure in this movie, flawed and crude though he is. He is a Christ figure because his actions embody the essence of God-revealed-in-Christ: a Giver, giving even to the point of self-sacrifice. A Giver, who gives everything.

Recently there has been a lot of attention in the press about Karen Armstrong's new book, *"A Case for God."* Armstrong talks about the "stunning realization" that it is absolutely impossible to describe God<sup>2</sup>. One reviewer noted she spends a grand total of 330 pages describing how we cannot describe God!

Yet this sense of mystery, this unknowable-ness, is also what Paul points to in Romans, "How unsearchable his judgments, his paths beyond tracing." One translation says, "unfathomable", (that's a great word!) another says "inscrutable" --beyond scrutiny, beyond our ability to understand (another great word).

On the one hand, Paul would agree with Armstrong that we puny humans cannot possibly describe God. On the other hand, I am pretty certain Paul would say

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<sup>2</sup> In the broader tradition, this is known as apophatic theology, or the way of negation. God is described as what God is not. Human language and concepts are completely inadequate to capture God. This theology is part of our own Christian tradition, and it is also expressed in mysticism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and Hinduism.

we still have to try.

Thankfully, there's more to it than just our own feeble attempts to describe God. We look to God's self-revelation, both in scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul helps us see the story of scripture, which in his world *was* the Hebrew Bible; Paul also helps us to see Christ. Both stories agree: God is a Giver.

Paul laces his letters with memories from his Hebrew school days. Paul paraphrases Job and Isaiah to remind us God is Source. The Source, who is beyond our ability to grasp. The Source (with a capital "S") GIVES.

*"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"*

It's GOD who gives, not us. God gives because this is *who God is*. God is a Giver. This may sound so simple it's ridiculous, but we tend to forget this! This is the essence of God: divine love that gives and does not receive. We cannot really give to God. God doesn't need anything from us! We cannot give anything back to God, because we don't own anything in the first place!

It's a little like when you take your children shopping and give them the money to buy you a birthday present. You open your wallet; you're standing right there when they select it. They go home and wrap it up, and they give it to you. It's a sweet gesture, and you act surprised and pleased when you open it, but the package they hand you isn't really the gift. The gift is something else, something intangible --- far beyond that thing in the box.

*We don't own anything in the first place!* We don't even own ourselves. We belong to God, every aspect of us! Our bodies, our spirits, our intellect, our talents, our accomplishments, our health, our families. This is radical, but it is also biblical. Paul says in Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive?" The answer is --- a resounding NOTHING!

This idea is biblical, but it is also radical, because it defies a major emphasis in our culture. It defies what most of us were taught. Earn your grades, work hard and you will advance; pull yourself up by your bootstraps, may the best person win; no pain, no gain; the self-made man or woman; on and on and on.

All we are is pure gift from God. Most of us have a hard time wrapping our minds around such overflowing GIFT, because our culture is stripped of GRACE. We are so accustomed to buying and selling, exchanging things, we don't even think in terms of gift. Even our so-called gift-giving is often just exchanging one thing for another.

In my study this week I ran across a quote that really hit home. It captures

the idea that what we are and who we are comes from God. This quote is directed to us, the privileged. We are privileged, every single one of us.

You may not feel very privileged. You may not have ten dollars to spare right now. You may be out of work, but you are still privileged. Why? Because God has gifted us! We live in a country where the standard of living is higher than almost anywhere else in the world at any other time in history. Even people living below the poverty level in the U.S. have better food, shelter, and education than the poor almost anywhere else in the world. We ARE the privileged. Who are we?

“We are those who were born on third base and we think we hit a triple.”

We are on third base, but we think we got there on our own.

It doesn't often occur to us that the family we were born into, the place where we were born, our very life and health, are gifts from the GIVER. We are at least three bases ahead of most of the rest of the world. We didn't even have to come up through the minor leagues. We didn't even have to try out for the team, most of us. We are already on the third base of life, heading toward home. Why? All because of the GIVER. All because of the God who GIVES.

Giving is hard for us. It's weighted with so much freight. We've messed it up so much that it's hard for us to imagine God whose entire BEING is giving.

In two weeks we will look at this again. It's important for now simply to reflect upon the great truth that God is Giver, to realize and recognize how everything comes from the Giver, and to take comfort and joy in God whose giving knows no ending.

*"Greater love has no man than this. . ."*

God whose giving knows no ending

We are so quick to lay claim to who we are and what we have.

In doing so,

We forget who you are: The GIVER who makes even our very breath possible.

The GIVER who prompts praise and thanks from our lips.

Give us God, the clear sight that recognizes our utter dependence upon you,

Humility to know we are not independent agents, but interdependent beings

Who seek to live lives of gratitude, fully alive and fully aware that life and love are GIFT.

In our gratitude, may we share the gifts you have so generously given us

Gifts of our abilities, personalities, hospitality

Gifts of time, attention, listening, caring

Gifts of practical help and material support

Gifts of experience, wisdom, expertise

Gifts to spread the gospel message of your giving even further

Gifts to respond to the deep longing so many feel

Make us generous givers, full of delight and care for your creation and for others who are in need of our giving. Expand our circles of giving far beyond ourselves, our families, our friends and into your world.

We pray all these things with the gift of words given to us by your Son, Jesus.