

Gifts to the World
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One of my favorite TV shows is The Big Bang Theory; it chronicles the lives of four friends—two are physicists, one is an aerospace engineer, and the other is an astrophysicist. Dr. Sheldon Cooper, one of the physicists, is probably the most socially awkward character and is played brilliantly by Jim Parsons who's won several Emmys and a Golden Globe for his performances. One of Sheldon's quirks is gift-giving and receiving. He wants to make sure that if you give him a gift, he returns the favor. However, his gift has to have the exact same monetary value as the one he received or he somehow feels indebted to you and that's not okay.

When exchanging Christmas presents with a friend one year, he goes to the mall and buys at least 10 baskets of bath products, lotions, etc., knowing that he will base the size of the basket he gives her on his estimated value of what she gives him. This is what he says to her, "I know you think you are being generous, but the foundation of gift giving is reciprocity. You haven't given me a gift. You've given me an obligation . . . the essence of the custom is that I now have to go out and purchase for you a gift of commensurate value and representing the same perceived level of friendship as that represented by the gift you've given me. It's no wonder suicide rates skyrocket this time of year." [1] Sheldon analyzes the practice of gift giving to such an extent, that he rarely if ever, enjoys the custom, whether it's at Christmas, or on his birthday, or at any other time.

I'm aware that it's not Christmas, but I've been thinking about gifts and giving and receiving gifts this week when I've looked at this prayer of Jesus in John. We are so used to thinking of Jesus as a gift to us, that Jesus' life and teachings, his death and resurrection are a selfless and loving gift to humanity. And I think that's okay, Jesus is and was a gift to us in some ways, wonderful! But have you ever thought that his followers were also a gift to him, that he may have perceived the disciples, not just back then, but even us today as gifts he received from God? Have you ever thought that we can be gifts to the world here and now and that we all have value as such?

Disciples of Christ minister Jennie Churchman says that what Jesus was saying to the disciples in his eloquent prayer was this, "You are called and empowered. And you are mine. I need you to carry on my work. I need you to pass on to others the wisdom I have shared with you. I need you to love one another as I have loved you. I need you to be the gift to the world that you are meant to be." [2]

Jesus needs us to be gifts to the world. What's remarkable is that Jesus prays this beautiful and moving prayer right before he's about to be betrayed and turned over into the hands of those in power by one man he was gifted by God. Moreover, the rest of the disciples he was entrusted with during his ministry will abandon him in the next chapters of the Gospel. He could have been so bitter when he sees that all of his work is apparently crashing down on him, but instead he prays to God on behalf of these disciples he was gifted by God up to the very end.

Jesus earnestly says, "While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. . . I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." [3]

There are some expressions of possession here, Jesus is saying I've protected these gifts you've given me while I could. But my time has come and now I need you, God, to protect them, to stay with them, to watch over them. I want them to go out into the world and live out my teachings. Though God, they need your help to do that because it can and sometimes will be a hostile place out there.

This prayer is so tender and compassionate, so full of hope and love. In the words of Scott Hoezee, a Reformed Church minister, "When you love people, you want the best for them and you express this in your prayers for them. You want to give thanks for the things worthy of gratitude and you also want to see them so singularly through a lens of love and compassion that you'll say things that may not be totally accurate at the moment but that will be true by and by and that will be gloriously true when that comes to pass." [4]

Next week is Pentecost, remember to wear your red to celebrate, for this is the day we celebrate the birth of the Christian Church. We'll see that the earliest disciples of Jesus Christ do have their glorious moment where they begin to courageously live out these teachings and do Christ's work in the world, forming Christian communities along the way that can witness and make a difference, and provide hope and live out that commandment that we are called to love one another as Christ first loved us.

Last week we saw Peter wrestle with the inclusion of Gentiles into the early community, and he realized that "they" were also part of "us." He realized that "God shows no partiality." [5] In some ways, aren't we still wrestling with these questions in the church today? Who are the modern-day Gentiles the Church may have historically struggled (or still struggles) to include? Do we allow women full leadership, including ministerial leadership, in the church? Do we allow same sex partners to marry and serve as clergy in our churches? Do we include those with mental or physical handicaps and try to build churches that affirm their membership among us? Do we include people of all races, ages, nationalities, backgrounds, and educational levels, into the life and ministry of the church? This church has answered "Yes" to all those questions, and thanks be to God for that!

Yet, there are other individual churches and whole denominations that continue to answer "No." But these brothers and sisters of ours whom we may disagree with to the core of our beings are gifts from God too. I have to tell myself this all the time. When Jesus prays to God and says, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them." [6] He's not just talking about my beloved United Church of Christ, he's not just talking about this congregation I serve and love, he's also talking about our neighbors both here and beyond whom we may not particularly agree with on some of the most pressing moral issues of our times. They are gifts from God to the world as well.

In this prayer from the Gospel of John, Jesus presents us with an aspirational vision of how things will be. Verse 20, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." [7] This happens to be the motto of our United Church of Christ, "that they may all be one." Our prayer today can and should be that all of this will come to pass, and not just in our denomination, but that we can find some common ground in Christ's call to love one another. Our prayer can be that we can live into this giftedness and speak the truth in love.

Because this whole prayer is Jesus' divine pep talk in some ways; it's a foreshadowing of the disciples' redemption after running away in fear as he was tried and crucified. Because that prayer that Jesus prayed on their behalf, this affirmation of us all as gifts from God, well it does often come true! We wouldn't be here today if the Church hadn't at some point come together and overcome some pretty major differences. And we, Christ's disciples who hear these words thousands of years later, know it came to pass and can be inspired by it all.

But we have some work to do. In the words of theologian Dorothee Soelle, a woman who never minced her words about what the call to discipleship means once wrote, "I know with certainty that the gospel can endure no neutrality, no opting out . . . There is no doubt at all on which side he [Jesus] stood: on the side of the poor, the people who were religiously uneducated and therefore despised—women, for instance—the outcasts, like the whores and the tax-collectors ... the aim of his struggle—the kingdom of God—meant overcoming a class society and turning it into one where brotherhood and sisterhood are possible. The call to take up your cross is the call to join the struggle. Take sides, break with your neutrality, put yourself on the side of the damned of this world." [8]

We have to keep living into our mission of unity and radical hospitality, and to do that, we may need to take sides sometimes. We can do this in a loving and respectful way, but it's clearly good to stand up for what's right. We have to take our beliefs out into the world and not be embarrassed by them or of our progressive Christian faith. We can provide an alternative Christian voice in the world, let's own it!

In the end, Jesus prays to God, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." [9] This doesn't just imply the disciples back then, it means us today. We have been and are being sent into the world to proclaim our vision of Christianity, to shout out our belief in Jesus' love commandment, to be Christ's teachings in bodily form, to enact this theology of inclusion we hold close to our hearts. Grounded in the love and strength of God, we have some work to do. May it be so. Amen.

[1] The Big Bang Theory, "The Bath Item Gift Hypothesis," 2008, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1256021/quotes>

[2] Jennie Churchman, "Now Choose" in *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions*, 2012, 148.

[3] John 17:12, 14-15

[4] Scott Hoezee, *Analysis of Lectionary Gospel Text John 17:6-19*, Center for Excellence in Preaching, Calvin Theological Seminary, <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>

[5] Acts 10:34

[6] John 17:10

[7] John 17:20

[8] Dorothee Soelle, *Choosing Life*, 53.

[9] John 17:18