

There's a peculiar ritual we all engage in. It typically happens after someone has hosted you at their home for a meal. As the night winds down and we make our way toward the door, offer handshakes and hugs and declarations that we simply *must* do this again soon, one of the visiting persons will insist, "Next time, WE'LL host." Depending on the mood, the hosts and guests might argue back and forth, the hosts insisting, "Oh, that's not necessary. We're *happy* to host. But of course we'd be delighted!"

Now I have nothing against trading parties back and forth. But beneath that ritual is an insight into how difficult we find it to give and receive gifts. We all know a gift is supposed to come with no strings attached. That's what makes it a gift, not a bribe or a loan. But when we receive a gift, we feel obligation. We feel strings.

We might be excused for that. How many phone calls and emails do we get in a week promising we've won a dream vacation totally FREE! Asterisk, please read the fine print because actually this will cost you a lot of money. We have been told since we were little that there's "No such thing as a free lunch!"

We learn to be careful with what we have. That everyone has an agenda, everyone wants something, and that no one will watch out for you unless you watch out for yourself. At best, we could characterize our attitude toward giving as Skepticism and Suspicion.

If that's our attitude toward giving, how much less generous is our attitude toward forgiveness? While we might be willing to forgive slight offenses, if someone has wounded us or our loved ones deeply, forgiveness is off the table. If the offender comes crawling to us, begging forgiveness, we might find it in our hearts to forgive, but we never forget. And if the person is unrepentant? They're dead to us.

We've all heard the saying, "To err is human, but to forgive, divine." Forgiveness is something most of us don't aspire to. We say it's for true heroes, people who are superhuman, divinely loving. Most of us just don't have the ability to forgive.

[Book + Volf] For the next six weeks, we're going to challenge this belief. This series is called FREE OF CHARGE, and we're working through [a book by one of my all-time favorite theologians, Miroslav Volf](#). We're going to talk about grace and forgiveness. And what we'll see is that we are most fully human when we are joyful, generous givers. That's because God is a giver, and we are created in God's image.

We'll see that we are most fully ourselves when we forgive freely and generously. That's because we're made in God's image, and God is a forgiver.

So today, let's talk about giving. You are a giver because God is a giver.

[Illustrate: God = Love, Love = Self-giving, God=Self Giving] Two verses help us understand God's divine nature: 1 John 4:8 tells us that God is love. But what kind of love? For that, we turn

to Jesus' words to his disciples. In John 15:13, Jesus defines love as, "Giving one's life for one's friends." So the essence of God's being is self-giving love. God is most fully God when God is giving Godself for the Other. God is a giver.

When we hear God is a giver, two wrong images of giving leap into our minds: God as a Negotiator and God as a Santa Clause. They're both wrong and toxic. [Mob-boss God] God the Negotiator is the God who gives, but only in return for faithfulness. You view God as a negotiator when you're hoping for something (big or small), so you start trying to be more faithful. Whatever we think God wants from us - reading our Bibles, giving money, praying, being nice to that jerk at work - we do *that* more and hope God is watching. Or, take when something bad happens. We ask, What did I do wrong? We wonder exactly what God is punishing us for.

God the Negotiator gives, but only in return for what God wants. This is not self-giving love.

This view of God is actually very old - it goes back to the sacrificial system pagan cultures employed all over the ancient world. In their creation myths, these gods created humanity because they didn't want to do any work. The gods relied on humanity to feed them. So I brought an animal to the priest and the priest burned it on the altar. The smoke rose to heaven and the gods feasted on the smoke of the sacrifice.

If my sacrifice was pleasing to the gods, the gods would bless me. Quid pro quo. I feed the gods, the gods give me crops, children, victory over my enemies. I don't give the gods what they want, and I should brace for their wrath.

But Yahweh, the god of the Bible, insists again and again that Yahweh is not like the other gods. One of the most significant differences between the creation story in Genesis 1 and the parallel stories in other ancient cultures is that Yahweh does not create out of need, but out of love. And Yahweh does not create humans to be slaves, but partners in the garden of creation.

Throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh insists again and again that the sacrificial system is *not* a quid pro quo system. God doesn't *need* sacrifices, and God doesn't eat only if humans feed him. Listen to Yahweh's words in Psalm 50. Pay particular attention to how Yahweh describes the sacrificial system:

O my people, listen as I speak. Here are my charges against you, O Israel:
I am God, your God! I have no complaint about your sacrifices or the burnt offerings you constantly offer. But I do not need the bulls from your barns or the goats from your pens. For all the animals of the forest are mine, and I own the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird on the mountains, and all the animals of the field are mine.

If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for all the world is mine and everything in it. Do I eat the meat of bulls? Do I drink the blood of goats? Make thankfulness your sacrifice to God, and keep the vows you made to the Most High.

Then call on me when you are in trouble, and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory." --
Psalm 50:7-15

Yahweh says, I don't need your sacrifices. You don't do them for me. You offer out of *gratitude*, not out of need.

God is not a Negotiator. God is the creator, and everything we have, we have as a gift from God. Think of it this way: We have nothing God needs. If our relationship with God was up to what WE can do for God, we'd be in a *lot* of trouble because God has everything and we have nothing but what we get from God.

[**Santa Clause God**] Others among us see God as a giver like Santa Clause. Despite our parental warnings to the contrary, we all know that Santa doesn't *really* keep track of who's naughty and nice. Santa gives gifts and flees back to the North Pole, not to be seen again until the following year. The gifts he leaves are for us to enjoy without regard for the giver's identity or desires.

So too, some of us see God the same way. God mainly wants us to be happy, to enjoy life, and so God gives us health and wealth and green lights and good parking spots so we can have a nice day.

Unfortunately, this is not the biblical picture of God's gifts. God does place demands on us - that we be not happy, but holy. God insists we be different from the world around us, that we embody God's way of life and flourishing, and that way most certainly is not a sort of "anything goes," *lasse-fair* path. This sort of giving does not lead to the good of the Other. It creates spoiled entitlement. This is not God.

This is where the religious panic attack starts to set in. Maybe some of you who have been in toxic relationships start to have flashbacks. Is God a needy, high-maintenance deity who gives us toys but insists we play by his rules? A God who gives us beautiful things like families and homes and jobs and they all come with strings attached? Is that maybe why God created us, so that God would have a bunch of people to walk around singing songs about how great God is all the time? Is God actually some kind of petty tyrant like Kim Jong Un?

No. God is not a Negotiator. God is not a Santa Clause. And God is not a tyrant. God is trinity. [**Pic of Trinity**] God is a single being who is three persons - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. All three exist in perfect unity and perfect harmony. They are one God.

You can get a headache quickly thinking about the Trinity, but here's why it matters: with the three persons in one being, God is completely satisfied inside of Godself. Because God is 3-in-1, God can give and receive inside of Godself. God can be God without anyone else.

You and I can't do that. I can't give myself a gift (this is a fundamentally different sort of thing than Parks n Rec's Treat Yo Self!). But because God is 3-in-1, God doesn't need us. God doesn't need you. God doesn't need me. God doesn't need Catalyst. God doesn't even need Pope Francis.

Does that make you nervous? To say that God doesn't need us? Like maybe God will just get tired of us and decide to be done with us? Maybe we said one too many bad words, or tailgated that car in front of us that apparently has never been on the road in their lives a little too closely or left dishes in the sink even though we promised we'd take care of them one too many times and God says, Why do I put up with this guy? It's not like I need him.

We wonder, if God doesn't need us, what does God want with us? If God doesn't need us, *why* does God give us gifts, and how can we know God isn't going to change God's mind?

[Scripture Slide] If you have a bible, turn with me to John 4. I want to look at a story of God's giving, a story that illustrates exactly why it's good news that God doesn't need us. In this story, Jesus encounters a woman who has been used and abused her whole life. As the story goes on, we find she's been married and divorced five times, and she's now living with a man who won't even marry her. She's outcast and hated by her whole town. Listen to how she reacts to Jesus when they first meet.

Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.

The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

Do you hear her skepticism? A woman who's been used her whole life wants to know, What do you really want from me?

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

"But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket," she said, "and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?"

Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life." -- John 4:7-14

[God gives to us] Jesus cuts through her skepticism to reveal the nature of God's gifts: God gives to us so that we can become like God. Jesus tells her that God's gifts lead us to life.

Which begs the question: how are you receiving God's gifts in your life? Do you recognize that everything you have is a gift from God?

Yes, I know you've worked very hard for what you have, that you've saved money and been smart. But the air we breath, the energy we have, the very life that animates our bodies are gifts from God. God is the creator and sustainer of life. Each moment is a gift we have received from God and when we do not stand before God with open hands to *receive* these gifts as gifts, we are entitled, selfish and wrong.

We gather to worship in part to stand before God together, hands open wide, to receive God's gifts. To receive them gratefully. Jesus promises that when we receive like this from God, we become fountains of living water. God transforms us into springs of life. But that's only half the good news.

[Trinity flows to us --> Flows through us to others] Friends, the Samaritan woman knew what the Scriptures tell us: that we are made in God's image. And if God is a giver, that means we are givers.

[Sin dams the flow of water] We were created as givers, but sin shrinks our hearts. Sin causes the living water in us to stagnate. Stagnate water isn't healthy - it's full of algae and disease. Once-living water becomes dead and disgusting. Through Jesus, God removes our sin and transform us back into springs of living water. A spring flows out from its source into the world. So too with us. God gives to us so that we can enter into the joy of giving as God does.

[Back to flowing water] To receive God's gifts does not mean just that we face God in worship with our hands open ready to take a present. To receive God's gifts means we stand before God ready to receive and then also ready to turn to our neighbors, to the world. to also give those gifts. This is how we become God's hands and God's feet.

This is precisely what happens to the woman. She came to the well, isolated and alone, looking for water. Jesus promised if she would receive the gift of God, she would become a fountain of living water and never thirst again. Look what happens next:

The woman *left her water jar* beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" So the people came streaming from the village to see him. -- John 4:28-30

She leaves her water jar - she doesn't need it anymore, and returns to the very people who had used and abused and rejected her. She tells them that she's met the Messiah, and the whole town comes to believe in Jesus.

You're a giver because God's a giver.

We don't live in a world of quid pro quo. We don't live in a world where God demands sacrifices in exchange for blessing. In fact, as Paul tells us in Romans, God demands US:

Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. -- Romans 12:1

God demands our lives. Because God will not leave us in a broken, half-existence. God wants to restore us to our true selves. God wants us to live as we were created to live, to bear God's image in this world. God wants us to join in the beautiful divine economy of receiving from God and then giving to others. of being forgiven by God and so forgiving others.

Today, we have gathered to worship. Today, we all stand before God with our hands open to receive God's blessings. This week, let us turn from God to our families, our neighbors, our coworkers, our enemies, that we might join God in giving good gifts to them. May we be known as a joyful, generous people through whom our world comes to know the God who offers them the life that is truly life.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] In a world where there's no such thing as a free lunch, Jesus says, "All who are hungry, come and eat." Eat my body, broken for you. Jesus says, "All who are thirsty, come and drink." Drink wine that is my blood, poured out for you. In a world that doesn't know how to give gifts, a world devoid of grace, God offers us the gift of his very life to ransom and rescue us from Death.

We approach the table today with our hands open to receive what we could never afford. And we leave with our faces turned to the world, transformed by God's grace into givers of God's good blessings.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive Communion. If you are willing to receive God's gifts and allow God to transform you into a giver, then you're welcome to approach the Table today.

1. When in the last week have I received God's gifts in faith?
2. When in the last week have I been entitled?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to be selfish?
4. How can I respond to God's generosity with generosity this week?

Let's pray.