

Berit Goetz
St. John's: Five-Minute Meditation
On God-giveness

Good morning, St. John's. This is Berit Goetz. It's May, and as the days lengthen, and spring starts to try on her summer dresses, and I bask in the feeling of being done with a graduate program I loved and reflect on all the last two years have meant, I've been thinking about what it is to receive a gift. In my family of origin, gift-giving is a matter of some import, precisely because we don't do it that often. At Christmas, each family member solemnly and gleefully draws a name out of a hat; the challenge is to find a single gift for that person that expresses love and thoughtfulness at a relatively modest price point. The limitations on the gift are what make it so special. And of course, this gift-giving tradition of ours drives home an important but often overlooked point about the nature of gifts, theologically speaking: they aren't "free," as some Christian commentators suggest. Gifts are discretionary, to be sure, but they're also caught up in a web of social relations, of hopes and expectations of reciprocity or ongoing relationship. A gift doesn't stand apart from the giver, or the receiver. Gifts mean more than themselves.

I've found this to be true in my experience of Christian life. Long before I dipped into Schleiermacher and his sense that religion is a feeling of utter dependence, I was convinced that the fullest expression of my identity as a Christian is to kneel at the Communion rail, empty hands outstretched. Like children, we receive what we have not earned. But, like children, in receiving, we are drawn more beautifully into the bond of love with the one who gives.

In our gospel reading from John, the deeply relational nature of gift-giving is on full display. Jesus is praying for his disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, just hours before he is going to be forcibly taken from them and murdered. I was astounded to find that in this eleven-verse excerpt alone, Jesus refers to that which is given no less than fifteen times. It's as though every syllable of Jesus' prayer is straining to express that things don't stand alone as bare facts; they are given and received. Jesus declares that he gives eternal life to "all the Father has given him." Jesus is God's gift to us, and yet mysteriously, we are God's gift to him, entrusted to his care. Jesus says to the Father, speaking of the disciples, "They were yours; you gave them to me. ...Everything you have given me comes from you... All I have is yours, and all you have is mine." I find this incredible. I spoke a version of these words at the altar on my wedding day. Here is a relentless vision of love that is not obligated but is joyfully implicated. The gift of God in Christ, the giving of abundant life through Christ, results in a union. Indeed, as Jesus says in the final verse of our passage, "May [the disciples] be one as we [the Father and the Son] are one."

So what happens when the gift is taken away? What does it mean to lose that which you did not earn? This is really the reason I've been meditating on gifts. The last two months, for me, have been characterized by the revoking of things that were privileges, not entitlements. My spring break plans. My graduation ceremony. My fully funded two-week trip to Peru with my cohort. I mean, many of these things were things I worked hard for, certainly. But they were gifts of the life I've been given by God—not inalienable rights. I've felt sadness and disappointment. But I haven't felt crushed by it. I think the reasons for this are well expressed in these lectionary readings. In John, Jesus is taken away. In Acts, he's taken away again—this time not to the cross, but to heaven. There's something strange and sad, and happy at the same time, about the Ascension. Even the writer of Acts seems to register this

ambivalence, this bittersweetness. Isn't there something a little touching, a little childlike and tragic, about his careful note that the disciples are "gathered around Jesus"? And the mysterious men in white who address the disciples after Jesus disappears from their sight put it that way too: "This Jesus *who has been taken from you*...will come back."

So I think the emotional ambivalence of the Ascension is a helpful model for me, perhaps for you too, in this time. What's been taken is a real loss. It's not final, or ultimate, but it's real. And yet there is a freedom and a joy and a hope that propels us to speak and act, because of what we've been given in love, and because of the Giver to whom we are united by the gift. Amen.