

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. *"As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace"*

What gift has God given you? When we read this passage, we might tend to think about gifts that are unique to each of us – a particular skill or talent, a specialized knowledge or experience. I don't know how many of you are keeping up with Disney movies but there's one recent one that seems to be reaching the popularity level of "Frozen!" It's a delightful little film called "Encanto." If you don't know what I'm talking about, there's a good chance you've at least heard the song, "We don't talk about Bruno." That movie.

Anyway, without spoiling too much, the story centers around a family where each family member has a "gift." A magical ability – one can cook food that cures any kind of infirmity. One has super strength. One can affect the weather with her mood. And they use these gifts to serve the community who gave them a home when they were displaced. There is one family member, and I won't say who, but this one never received a gift. So a lot of the plot has to do with this character trying to figure out their place and how they can be useful without having a special ability.

Do you ever feel that way? You know, where you kind of wonder – "What can I do to serve my neighbor? I'm not especially good at anything. Where do I fit into this family called the church?" Well, lest any of us think that we don't have a gift, let me tell you – our God is in the business of giving gifts! He outgives Santa Claus every year, hands-down. And there are gifts that God has given to *all* of us.

There are probably too many to name but if we look to Luther's Small Catechism, we find quite a few that cover all the basic categories. There are what we might call the "First Article" gifts, referring to the first article of the Creed. Things God gives to all of his human creatures. We might also call these physical gifts: my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses...clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, [spouse] and children, land, animals, and all I have.

What other gifts have we received, specifically as Christians? We might call these "second article gifts" or "spiritual gifts" having to do with our salvation. What are these? God sent us his Son Jesus Christ. Wow! That's everything right there! God sent a Savior *for us*. What a gift! He sent Jesus to redeem me, to purchase and win me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. Our purchase price was not silver or gold but Jesus' blood; his innocent suffering and death. And then there are more gifts! How is that salvation delivered to me? It comes wrapped in the packaging of Holy Baptism, it comes wrapped in God's Holy Word, it comes wrapped in those precious words of absolution: "In the name of Jesus I forgive you all your sins!" It comes wrapped in the Holy Supper.

Then there are what we might call “Third article gifts.” God gives the gift of His Holy Spirit. When we were baptized the Spirit made his home in us. It is the Spirit who draws us to Jesus, who puts those wonderful gifts into our hands, who gathers us into the family of God, who keeps us in saving faith, and who animates us as we live the new life as followers of Christ, God’s baptized children.

All these gifts are things that God has given to all of us! So if you’re ever feeling like you don’t have any gifts, pick up your catechism. It can be a very heartening reminder!

Now, good Lutherans know that when it comes to receiving God’s gifts, we are completely passive. We do nothing to earn those gifts. As with most Disney movies, not everything squares with Scripture but one thing “Encanto” hit on that I thought was very biblical – there’s a line in one of the closing songs that goes, “The miracle is not some magic that you’ve got; The miracle is you, not some gift, just you.” We are so thankful that God does not value us based on our abilities. He loves us because he loves us! Or to borrow from the catechism again, “*All this God does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.*” And this is great news because God’s love is never conditional. It is not based on how well we serve or how well we avoid sin. God’s love in Christ is unconditional.

So we are passive recipients of God’s gifts but when it comes to how we then use the gifts God gives us, we are not passive. We get to be active participants with God! We receive from God passively. We serve our neighbors actively. So *those* gifts that we all have *and* those special gifts that God gives, we are called to use them to serve one another. This also sets the pattern for worship and life in the congregation. We come to the Divine Service and there again we are the receivers, right? God serves us. Every week, he stuffs our sacks full of gifts again: forgiveness, life, salvation. And then we get to go distribute those gifts to others. As individual Christians in our vocations and together as congregations, we use those gifts to serve others. How exciting it is for congregations to lift up everybody as royal priests with work to do for Christ’s kingdom! It gives worth and dignity to our lives when we see ourselves as Christ’s partners in service. And all our service is geared toward one goal, which comes in the next verse: “*that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.*” In other words, we serve others, whether they are already Christians or not, to show them that God loves them not based on “some magic that you’ve got, not some gift, just you.” We love and serve as Christ first loved and served us, just for loves’ sake, expecting nothing in return.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.