

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." An interesting little aside is that the only reason we know Jesus said that is that the Apostle Paul quotes him: "Remember how the Lord said." Jesus saying it isn't recorded in any of the gospels. It's just one more indication that the Bible doesn't contain everything that happened.

It may be more blessed to give than to receive – it must be, Jesus said so, but it is also a whole lot easier for many of us to give than to receive. Receiving – or needing – is something that makes some of us uncomfortable. It is humbling.

I am one of those people, I have to admit. I prefer to be on the helping side of the equation. I suffer from that peculiar malady often attributed to makes of reluctance to ask for directions. I don't like to admit that I can't do it on my own. Just give me enough time, and I'll figure it out. I'd rather be late than needy.

I am a terrible patient. When I'm sick I just want to be left alone. I don't want to take medicine or do whatever cure you know that worked miracles for your grandmother. I just want to draw into myself and tough it out. I don't like to be fussed over.

It may just be a macho thing that comes from growing up as a male in the culture when I grew up. But for whatever reason I don't like to think of myself as being needy. I can take care of myself in all ways – physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

But when I look back over my life there is a long line of people who have cared for me – people who have given to me not because I was particularly deserving but just because it was the kind of people they were. Whatever capacity I have to give came from what they gave me along the way. I know something about love because I have been loved.

There was a high school Latin teacher who in the course of two years of classes five days a week managed to teach me about no Latin at all. Instead he taught me about grace and forgiveness, and something about integrity and maturity. He had been in the process of becoming a Jesuit priest until he met the woman who became his wife. Even in a public school he taught one about God and the awesome wonder of a love that knows no limits and cannot be denied. I can't conjugate the Latin word for love – I don't know that I ever could – but I remember what he gave me.

There was a tenth grade English teacher who taught me how to laugh at myself and have a bit of lightness in my heart.

There was a grandmother who shared her faith with me from as early as I can remember. She was a devout Southern Baptist who walked her talk. There was no judgment in her and I knew that she loved me as much like God loved me as was humanly possible. She had very little and had known a lot of grief in her life, but she taught me about caring for people who had less.

There was a man in the mountains of North Georgia who pulled my car out of the mud when I took a troop of Boy Scouts camping where we had to drive for miles and miles on unpaved roads. His pickup truck couldn't get enough traction in the mud so he sent a flatbed truck to town twenty miles away to get his tractor from a repair shop. When I tried to pay him he just smiled and walked away. I never knew his name, but he gave me a whole lot more than a rescue from a muddy ditch.

There was the assistant rector of the Church where I spent my teenage years who spent hours with me nurturing a call that was beginning to stir within me. There was a priest in Grand Rapids, Michigan who let me talk for two hours about what was heavy on my heart. He said almost nothing and gave no advice, no solutions to my problems. And yet I felt a burden lift, and I learned something about healing.

There have been some clergy along the way. But mostly they have been just ordinary people not trying to give or trying to take care of me. They have just been people who cared for me not because I was special but because they were. They loved me not because I deserved it but because they had hearts filled with love.

There is a wall in my office that I call my credentials wall. It is much like the wall you will find in many offices. I have there some of the certificates that say I am qualified to do what I do.

My college diploma is there, and my ordination certificates are as well. My seminary diploma is there saying that I graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary. Over the years the signatures on my seminary diploma have faded so that now they are completely gone – just blank lines. I sometimes wonder if they used word disappearing ink knowing something that I didn't know. Or maybe they weren't so sure.

At the top of all the other things, is my baptism certificate. It says that I was baptized at the First Baptist Church of Marietta, Georgia one month after my ninth birthday. The ink has not faded; the signatures are still there. I still remember walking down the aisle a few weeks earlier to commit my life – and my heart – to Jesus. I don't know that I knew what I was doing – not really – but I knew it was something holy.

I have my baptism certificate there because that is the thing on which all else rests. What qualifies us for ministry is not education or ordination. It is not our knowledge of the Bible or our sophisticated theological insights. What qualifies us for ministry is baptism.

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” You are cherished.

Someone – maybe it was John Westerhoff – said that we don't make anything happen in sacraments. We don't have that kind of power. Rather sacraments are signs and seals of what God is already doing. We bring it to mind. Maybe we knock on the shell of a proud heart so that the gift of love may be received.

Two things happen in baptism. We are called, and we are loved. God draws us close to God's heart and tells us that we are cherished. You are beloved.

And we are called to mission. We are called to join the line of those who influence and shape the lives of others. We are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons. We are called to strive for justice and peace among all people. We are called to respect the dignity of every human being.

The call and the love are not separate things – but two different things. They are opposite sides of the same coin. If you read the Gospel of Luke it seems that being cherished was what empowered Jesus to the unique vocation that was his.

This love of God is not a dead end thing just for my own personal joy. If it doesn't change my life then I have stopped short of understanding it; I have stopped short of opening myself to receive it. And this mission that is ours – this challenge to change the world – isn't a burden that we bear. It is the privilege of being loved.

We – you and I – are like a modern day John the Baptist. We are the forerunners. We are the ones to tell the world that the love of God has broken into the world. Christmas is over, but it has only just begun. We baptize with water. There is one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

You are cherished.

Amen.

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