

*Based on Matthew 6:3. On Giving Alms.*

*All we have is all a gift. It comes from you, O God. We thank you for it. Amen.*

This is the prayer offered by one of my brothers' family before they eat a meal together. There are a lot of children in that family, and it is adorable to hear them join the prayer in their sing song voices. And then, being Catholic, they conclude with the sign of the cross.

A simple blessing at mealtime to remind us of the blessing for all time: everything is a gift. All of it. Food, clothing, shelter, family, employment, earth, air, water, trees.

*All we have is all a gift. It comes from you, O God. We thank you for it.*

Life itself is a gift.

We forget that - or at least I do - in the busy-ness of the gift, in the frets and frustrations of navigating the gift, in the terror unfolding in Washington and around the world threatening the gift.

We think we *own* the gift - or at least I do - or that we are entitled to the gift or that somehow we earned the gift with our smarts and our savvy, with our fancy degrees and our impeccable work ethic. (Not that there is anything wrong with those things, just that the gift does not rely on them.) We are so afraid of losing the gift - or at least I am - that we hoard it with clenched hands and a tight heart instead of trusting the gift to keep on giving if we celebrate and use and share it, while offering our own gift in return. At times - or maybe a lot of the time, when doubt and fear are at their strongest - we feel the gift may be more burden than blessing. I've been there, too.

Indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer has spent her life inviting us back to *a world made of gifts*. *We are showered every day with ... gifts*, she reminds us. *We have neither earned nor paid for [them]: air to breathe, nurturing rain, black soil, berries and honeybees, the tree that became this page, a bag of rice, and the exuberance of a field of goldenrod and asters at full bloom.*

The world is, indeed, made of gifts. How, then, do we respond?

Robin Wall Kimmerer offers four options: we celebrate the gift, saying *thank you* as much as we can as long as we can, never taking the gift for granted; we learn from the gift, what the forsythia has to teach us, what the robin knows, what the landslide and the volcano have to say; we recognize the dignity of the gift, that it has meaning and purpose beyond our own selfish satisfaction; and we change our way of living in response to the gift, transformed by the interaction to care as much for the gift as it has cared for us.

The biblical tradition parallels the wisdom Robin Wall Kimmerer is trying to revive, even though we know too well how the Bible itself has been co-opted in ways that exploit and destroy the gift. In its entirety, the biblical

tradition insists the world is a gift from God, and all that is in it. Abundant, plentiful. Enough for everyone. The biblical tradition in its entirety insists the land is *on loan*. It does not belong to us; it belongs to God, as does every thing and every being that emerges from the land. All of life, in the biblical tradition, is, as Robin Wall Kimmerer describes, *kin*: family.

In the biblical tradition we have *Torah*, or *The Law* or *The Teaching* or *The Commandments* of the exodus designed to guide the people to live together in this land of promise and plenty in such a way that the gift is celebrated and shared and perpetuated for generations.

Instead, in the biblical tradition, as in the world today, the human part of the gift forgets its place. The Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith puts it this way: *Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.*

Ouch. We have, indeed, forgotten the gift.

Given this self-inflicted nonsense (or SIN) of humanity, the biblical tradition institutes the practice of *almsgiving* to atone for our failure to live in a world made of gifts. This is the practice to which Jesus refers in our Lesson today. Accompanied with prayer and fasting, almsgiving invites us to intentionally review the resources God has placed in our care - or, perhaps more honestly, to review the resources an unjust and inequitable distribution of gifts have been hoarded into our care - and to redistribute those resources according to need.

While almsgiving is often equated with charity, its true meaning is nothing of the sort. The word in Hebrew, translated into Greek and then English in the New Testament, is *tzedekah*. It means *right living*. It is about actively working toward a just and equitable world. It includes giving time and service as well as money. It is for communities as well as individuals. Our gifts to Shepherdstown Shares and the Community Meal are *tzedekah*. So is our overwhelming outpouring of opposition to the proposed water bottling plant in Middletown and our willingness to host a training event for hunger action advocates in the eastern panhandle.

The challenge with *tzedekah*, then and now, is that it can become for show. It can become about ego. It can be all about what a great church we are because we do all of these wonderful things. (And Jesus plants his head in his hands.) Or it can be a way of assuaging our guilt without actually working for a world in which almsgiving is no longer necessary. It can be a perpetuation of, rather than a commitment to transform a world that is forgotten it is made out of gifts.

This is why Jesus tells his students to give alms with humility. The *tzedekah* of almsgiving, Jesus insists, is not about how great we are. The *tzedekah* of almsgiving is about how great the gift is!

If you have not yet taken up almsgiving as a spiritual practice, now is as good a time as any to start. One easy way is to put a fish box on your dining room table, as our children do, and put any spare change or extra dollars

- or even a hundred dollar bill or two - in the box whenever you eat. Consider those in our world who do not have enough to eat. Eat a simple meal and donate the savings. Consider how you will do your part to work for a world made of gifts. Pray the prayer of my brother's family if you do not have a blessing of your own. (You don't have to sign yourselves with the cross when you are done, but hey, if that helps you enfold the prayer better, go right ahead!)

If you already practice almsgiving - even if you just call it *giving* - now is as good a time as any to re-evaluate your practice. Is your giving coming from a place of gratitude or is it begrudging? Does your giving come with strings attached or is it freed for use as the Spirit sees fit? Can you give more than you already do? Can you receive the giving of others when you find yourself to be the one in need?

At the end of the day, the teaching of every spiritual tradition of which I am aware is clear. We do not own the gift of this world and all that is in it. We celebrate the gift. We learn from the gift. We acknowledge the dignity of the gift. We transform our living in response to the gift. Just like we do here at the table.

*We are showered every day with gifts*, Robin Wall Kimmerer says. *All we have is all a gift*, my brother's prayer says. Give with both hands in the response to the gift, Jesus says.

*All of it comes from you, Oh God.*

*We thank you for it.*