Columns
Spirituality



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"It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

We have been schooled for centuries to accept this as best behavior. Be a giver. But think about it. At that first Christmas, a helpless baby in a crib, in a stable, did not give anything. He had angels singing in the sky, lowly shepherds visiting, kings bearing gifts. His parents enjoying the music, the visit from the shepherds, the gifts of the kings. Accepting gifts offered. He was not able to give anything in return. Not then. Is he not our teacher? Teaching on that special day, with an unexpected twist. Getting can be as good as giving. Both are good. Both appropriate.

Today, in our lives, no angels are singing in the sky, but maybe we meet some angels walking down the hall. Or waiting for a bus. On the TV. Maybe a call from home. Or at the grocery store. Or in a doctor’s office. Maybe driving down the road.

In our search for holiness, for wholeness we often focus on our own behavior and how we can bring peace to a fractured world. A worthy effort. But it might be time to take the internal camera lens off our own behavior. Maybe it's time to focus during any holy season on the folks that surround us. People who hope and work for peace, for holiness, for wholeness on any holy night or ordinary day. Neighbors who give with no expectation of return.

Ordinary day. Yes. He carried my heavy grocery bag to the elevator for me. No questions asked. No singing. Providing rest for my formerly broken shoulder. He didn't know that. He was just one of the young men, a boy really, from the apartment down the hall. No singing. Not even any conversation. Just, "Let me take that bag for you." He had no idea that he was an angel at work. I secretly praised his mother who taught him about magic moments in life.

I was running late for an important meeting. In the wrong lane. She waved me over. No wings in sight. But a heavenly favor.

My doctor, with a determined look on her face as she looks at my test results. She looks at me and smiles. Relax, she says. All look really good. Allowing me to return to normal breathing.

Really simple moments. The clerk in the grocery store with a smile on his face and a kind word, packing my order carefully with all the frozen items in the same bag. How simple can gifts get while looking for angels?

We are formed to believe that giving is better than receiving. But this time, turn the camera lens around to gratefully recognize and receive the hearts that surround us.

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There are big gifts to celebrate as well in the great big part of the world. Beyond our neighborhood perhaps, but worth supporting. Habitat for Humanity. Food banks. Salvation Army's red bucket and bell. Giving tree. Art. Music. Developing vaccines. Special Olympics. Firefighters and police officers. Teachers. Nurses. All worthy of gratitude.

Are we blessed or not? To live in a place where goodness is all around. Where gifts are offered and if we honor our teacher, we accept what is offered. With a grateful heart. And soon, a grateful heart is full enough to overflow. And then, only then, can we give.

Most of us are ordinary people in ordinary time. The overflow of our full hearts most often blesses ordinary moments. Telling the boss at the grocery store that the clerk did a great job. Writing a review for a special doctor on My Chart. Perhaps leaving cookies at the apartment door down the hall.

But then, there is Christmas. And Easter. And Thanksgiving. I think we all need holidays to take a moment to remember that the baby in the crib developed into the savior that gave us a model. That the man who died on a cross won the final round when he rose into heaven in a glorious way. He paved the way, our teacher, to understand both giving and receiving.

So there are times when it is better to give. But also times when it is just as appropriate to receive. As we make our way through the sometimes rocky road of our everyday lives, we learn to balance. To give generously and to receive with gratitude.

In the meantime, celebration is in order. Ordinary people in ordinary times do need holidays. To step into joyful celebrations with family and friends to give and receive reminders of love and generosity that made us who we are. Simple people with generous hearts, ready to give and receive. Sharing hugs and memories and our very being with those who are an intimate part of our journey.

And yes, beautifully wrapped gifts, too.

After all, it is Christmas day.

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.