

As a young girl, I remember going Christmas caroling with an intergenerational group from church. My dad, the pastor, would call way in advance to ask if we could come by and sing a few carols, and most of the places where we stopped to sing had something sweet to offer us. Thomas was developmentally disabled and in his 50s. He was a big kid at heart with a very big sweet tooth! By about the tenth house on our caroling tour, as we were leaving, Thomas leaned in and began to fill his pockets with candy. Most of us weren't allowed any more candy, as we had had nothing but sugar offered to us all night long. You would've thought that Thomas had won the lottery, as he beamed from ear to ear, showing off his few remaining teeth, as he emptied the candy dish. Mrs. Slattery, a very strict senior citizen, leaned into Thomas and said, "Now, Thomas... Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," and she patted Thomas' hand away from the candy dish and then looked at him sternly and said, "Put some of that stashed candy back," and she stared at his pockets until he put some of it back. I remember resenting Mrs. Slattery that night. Did Jesus really say those words and if so, did he mean them in this way? This should've been one of our bumper stickers last summer! Did Mrs. Slattery mean that there's no blessing at all in receiving? I wonder if this statement from scripture is often perceived among some Christians today as a judgment against receiving? In the context of today's story in Acts, the people of Ephesus, in particular the elders, are grieving Paul's departure. Paul reminds the leaders of God and of God's message of grace: **a message "that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all whom God has made holy"** (Acts 20:32). Paul offers an example of supporting

the weak by adding the words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." What are we to make of this farewell address from Paul? Is this yet another example of how we take Scripture out of context?

Before turning to God's word for us this day, first let us **PRAY. READ.**

I wonder if this text is NOT about manipulating you or me into giving but rather a text inviting us to give because God first gave to us? **This is the message of God's grace** that Paul entrusted with the Ephesians. They are grieving because they've received greatly from God through Paul's presence and ministry among them and now Paul has announced he is leaving their community. These elders don't know what the future holds and are more than likely overwhelmed and afraid. In Paul's parting words, he instructs the Ephesians that it is more blessed to give so that others can receive the gospel and the gift of God's grace. The Ephesians had been receiving and now it is time to give, especially to those in need.

When have you remembered the gifts that you have received from God and rejoiced or given thanks? Many times we hear Scripture such as this Acts passage, and we, like Mrs. Slattery, think only of the giving. Some of us also hear this scripture and immediately think of money. Maybe giving looks just as much like offering a cup of water or a kind word? Any of us- no matter our socio-economic status can give these things. But what about the receiving- or what some of us may refer to as a hand out? I've watched as some of you- the unseen in Greenville- the least of these-our siblings in Christ swallow their pride, if some still feel worthy

enough, and receive assistance in the form of food and other basic necessities as well as case management, medical care, legal aid and/or recovery programs. I've watched some of your vulnerability in receiving as well as your gratefulness to God and others. I've also watched some of you wanting to give back through cleaning the bathrooms, picking up trash outside, maintaining the church grounds and other acts of service. And for that we're most grateful. And there are also some among us who have no problem receiving and look for one every chance that comes around.

Isn't that the basic message of Christianity- that we've received a hand out from God called grace?! You know grace- the mercy and love of God offered to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Grace- the gift for which we've done absolutely nothing to earn or deserve. Grace- freely given by the power of Holy Spirit- that which enables us to inherit the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven. God's grace causes us to receive joy and thus respond to that joy by giving to others! And yet, how many of us struggle to receive God's gift of grace? Many of us are uncomfortable with receiving. Maybe it's that we're too prideful? Maybe we like to be the ones in control, and play God, choosing to whom we dole out the goods- choosing who is the most deserving to receive? Afterall, who wants to be the vulnerable receiver? Maybe it's because we feel ashamed or unworthy to receive God's grace? Or maybe we're embarrassed to receive because we don't know how or we cannot reciprocate or perhaps we feel obligated to give something in return? This way of giving/receiving can be neverending. Please don't write me

a thank you note for my thank you note. Regardless of the reasons why...isn't it true that most of us gathered here today struggle to receive more than to give? What does it mean if you're on the receiving end? When someone gives you a compliment, what do you say in return? Do you simply say, "Thank you" or do you say something like, "Oh, this old thing?! I've had it for years?" Or are you, like Mrs. Slattery, not willing to accept something that someone has given you because you don't want to take advantage? Remember the kingdom of God is very upside down to the way the world operates. As followers of Christ, when we give out of love, we should expect nothing in return. And when we receive, we truly receive it as a gift. God doesn't transact like we do- there are no strings attached! Therefore, when someone wants to give us a gift, no matter how much or how little money they have, and we refuse to receive it, what if we rob them of the joy of giving and thus we rob them of glorifying God?

Maybe because we've just experienced Helene, but I recall when Hurricane Katrina hit, and I took a group of Vanderbilt students to work in Mississippi. While there, we worked ripping out dry wall and cleaning out debris from Joe's and his partner's home. Joe was a veteran who had recently retired from years of work as a psychiatric nurse. While listening to Joe talk about his loss and grief from the storm, I saw a cedar chest sitting off to the side. The students were gathering pieces of molded dry wall as well as remnants of furniture to take to the roadside for trash pickup. I asked Joe what he wanted us to do with the chest, and he began to weep uncontrollably. The cedar chest was extremely

sentimental to Joe, as it was his grandmother's and had held the ashes of both his mom and sister, along with many other precious memories. During the storm, the chest got picked up, tipped over and forced opened, spilling its' contents into the rising and rushing waters. Everything inside the chest was washed away, and Joe was heartbroken. After crying for a good while, Joe suddenly got up, wiped his eyes, popped the chest open and read the original manufacturer info on the inside of the lid. Joe looked at me with tears in his eyes and a smile on his face and said joyfully, "It was made in Tennessee. That's it! Jennifer, you're from TN! God wants you to have my chest!" I smiled and shook my head, as if to politely shake off his crazy suggestion. I didn't want or need a cedar chest, and I sure wasn't going to take anything from this man who had just lost most of everything he owned. I was ready to try to divert his attention or run to the restroom. And then...I heard a voice that said, "Jennifer, take the blankety-blank chest." Before I knew it, the students and I were rearranging the vehicle to make room for this large cedar chest. Fast forward to a few months later, I received a letter from Joe. In it, he wrote, "

**Jennifer, I knew when we met that you were the person to receive my Grandma's Cedar chest. In my heart, I felt that you were sent here on purpose; to assist us in the healing process and accept my gift. When the chest was placed in your vehicle, a perfect fit, the load was lifted from my heart.**

**(There are several reasons --not a coincident -- why I believe this).**

**The message of God's grace is found in both giving and receiving.**

Receiving leads to giving. When I moved from Nashville, I gave the chest to a former student who had gotten married and didn't have much furniture. Of course I shared with her about Joe and the story of the chest. Receiving leads to giving. Afterall, it's the blessings that holds

those both together- the giving and the receiving. One Sunday earlier last year, I was giving the benediction and one of our parishioners, who has been through some really hard things, gave me a special rose he made out of a palm branch recycled from Palm Sunday. After transforming the frond into the rose, he painted it in the Art Room and gave it to me. An artist in the congregation captured the tender, beautiful moment, and you better believe I received it though I know he could've sold it for income he needs, as he's sold several of his art pieces to make ends meet. Yet, the rose is on my desk for all to see! We love because God first loved us. Receiving has to come first, in the form of God's gift of grace. And then...as a response to God's gift of grace, we give back to others, especially those who are in need. It's hard to give authentically or joyfully if your spiritual tank is empty or if you aren't fully receiving or accepting God's gift of grace. God is the ultimate Giver and yet, doesn't even God receive our thanks? When we gather to worship God, God receives our offerings and our praise- a harvest of thanksgiving.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic theologian, writes, "When gifts are accepted, they acquire a place in the life of the receiver. It is understandable that many people want to give a gift in return as soon as possible, thereby reestablishing the balance and getting rid of any dependent relationship. We often see more trading than accepting. Perhaps the challenge of the gospel lies precisely in the invitation to accept a gift for which we can give nothing in return. For the gift is the life breath of God, the Spirit poured out on us through Jesus Christ" (p. 51, With Open

Hands). The economy of God's grace doesn't work on reestablishing the balance or taking score. Everything we are and have belongs to God. Life is a gift. We can all give and we can all receive. And like the Ephesians, we can give thanks to God for grace and love and then pass it on- for this isn't a gift that we hold on to; we regift it; we pass it on with no strings attached. **This is the message of God's grace. This is how Christ reigns on earth as it is in heaven! May we be participate in God's kingdom through our receiving and our giving.** Thanks be to God! Amen.