

# **Gifts are for Service, Needs are for Community and Love**

*By Ray Dlugos OSA, PhD*

When St. Paul tells us that gifts differ, he points out that each one of us has something to offer in service of others that no one else can give. This uniqueness, this giftedness is highly valued in our Western culture and we celebrate, because we all have gifts that differ, that each of us is truly irreplaceable. Indeed, the fascinating diversity of the universe, beautiful, mysterious and never exhausted, is made possible by the uniqueness of the individual gifts offered by each creature to all other creatures. When our gifts are not shared, the human community and the whole universe are deprived, unable to be the full reflection of the one whose image it is our common purpose to accurately reflect. Only when gifts are freely shared can their dazzling beauty, intricate diversity and awesome wonder do justice to the glory of the giver of all gifts.

Still, there is something dangerous about placing so much emphasis on these gifts that differ and the unique individuality they bestow on each of us. Because gifts differ, they also separate and isolate. Because there is only one of me, no one else can fully and completely appreciate what it's like to be me. Because gifts differ, they can quickly and easily become sources of division, evoking feelings of jealousy and shame as I inevitably compare my gifts with yours. When I see that you have something that I want, I may try to take it for myself, or I may try and will certainly fail to give your gift to others. If I cannot have your gift for myself, I may deprive you of your giftedness by attacking it, ridiculing it, or finding some way to keep you from giving it away.

Gifts allow each of us to shine and be noticed. When our gifts are noticed, the admiration and appreciation we enjoy receiving from others makes us want to give them away all the more. But when our giving seems to be overlooked or ignored or refused, the isolation and loneliness experienced even by the very generous is acute and painful. After all, if I cannot draw you to me with the best I have, how can I possibly get you to come close enough to really know me and love me? By placing so much value on gifts, we forget that admiration, because it requires distance and inequality, is not intimacy. Even when we win the admiration of others, we are left with the cold reality that admiration, as good as it may feel, is a far cry from the warmth of love and closeness of compassion.

If I believe that all that matters about me are gifts I have to offer, then it is very difficult to give them freely and without cost. By making my gifts available to others, I lose control of them and create the possibility of others exploiting my gifts for their purposes and not for mine. Even if others benefit greatly from my gifts, by offering them freely I am guaranteed nothing, not even thanks, recognition or admiration in return. From what I have observed both within myself and from the vantage point of a therapist here at Southdown, a tremendous amount of anger, resentment, self-pity, and even self-righteousness arises within us when we do not receive what we openly or secretly hope for in response to offering our gifts in the service of others. And so we come face to face

with the stark and perhaps cold reality that gifts, regardless of their value, uniqueness, or the generosity with which we offer them, will never bring us love.

Could it be that is how it is supposed to be? As we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation this season, we see that when God became one of us in Jesus, his likeness to us is not found in his gifts or ours. Rather than taking our collective giftedness on himself, we celebrate the willingness of Jesus to embrace our weakness, vulnerability, and neediness. As the Gospels describe his ministry, we frequently see Jesus engaged with large crowds whom he addresses as one. He never differentiates or singles out individuals for their unique talents. He frequently points to common and shared weakness and dependence as the source of unity and love. It is as if he is teaching crowds where everyone looks alike, each one of us as wounded and hungry, hurt and struggling, vulnerable and lost as the other.

And he loved us. He did not admire us. Or single out any of us for special treatment or recognition or honor. He just loved us all. Apparently, while our gifts cannot draw the love of others to us, our weakness and our need are irresistible to the love of our Savior.

When Jesus chose and sent his disciples forth into mission, it was not their gifts that set them apart for this service. He did not choose them because of any unique set of talents that qualified them and no one else for this mission. Rather, he sent people who looked just like the crowds on which he had pity and sent them with authority to heal and offer hope. He further instructed them to leave their unique gifts behind, their money, their clothes, their power, their security, anything that might separate them from the crowd that had moved him so deeply with love. Take nothing with you...Give without cost what you have received without cost.

Gifts differ and are for service. Given freely they respond to the emptiness in another just as another's gift will touch the emptiness in me. But what draws us together is not the gifts that differ, but the emptiness and vulnerability we all share in common. Gifts are for service, absolutely, but they will not get us love. Community and love start in how we are the same, not in how we differ. Community and love are built on the foundation of our common need and weakness, not in the gifts that differ.

Perhaps here we will find the beginning of justice, forgiveness, and the foundation of real human community. Justice begins when I know myself to be as vulnerable as you, and I seek to help us both be safe. Forgiveness begins when I know myself to be as sinful as you, and try to find a way to makes us both more complete. Community begins when I know myself to be as broken, needy, and dependent on you as you are on me, and celebrate that only together can we be whole.

We can certainly continue to celebrate our gifts by giving them away, knowing that we have them only for the service of others and not the satisfaction of our needs. We can celebrate our gifts by giving them freely, by giving them abundantly. It would be tragic and wrong for us to ever withhold from the unfolding drama of the universe the parts that belong only to each one of us. We can enjoy whatever satisfaction comes our way from

the generosity our gifts empower. As well, we need to know and celebrate that while love will not be found in giving gifts, it will be ours in abundance when we know ourselves joined with each other in the faceless, hungry, needy, wounded crowd.