

Every Perfect Gift

 "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above..."
— James 1:17 NRSV

What is the best gift you have ever received?

I have been asked this question throughout my life by many people in different contexts. Possible answers to a parent or a teacher could be a new walkie-talkie set (these were the Seventies), a bike, a horseback ride with my grandmother, or when I was a teenager, a jeep in the driveway with a big red bow on it. Later it could have been my education, a chance to study abroad, canoeing with my dad on a quiet river, making Christmas cookies with my mom.

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What did these perfect gifts give me, aside from the pleasure of the possession? They each taught me about living in the moment, appreciating what I had - whether it was long afternoons playing "secret agent" in the backyard with my best friend and our walkie-talkies, or singular moments like listening to the sound of the current of a river on a quiet summer afternoon with my father. They also taught me generosity, for the delight I had in experiencing the gifts called me to share such moments and experiences with others. This is the relationship between receiving and generosity, and it's a pattern, that, once it takes root in us, continues in perpetuity. The more we practice generosity, the more abundance we recognize around us.

Every Generous Act

In many congregations it is the practice to sing the Doxology as our gifts – the elements of the Eucharist and our offerings – are brought to the altar for blessing. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow," it begins; and these words remind us of the font from which springs all generosity, all love, all gift. We are called in that moment to reflect on this cycle of abundance sparked with the first light and made manifest in the Creation, in the calling of prophets, and in the gift of God's own son on Earth. As we share our gifts through the Eucharist and through our service to the world, we participate in the ongoing creation of abundance and generosity.

What is the best gift you have ever received?

The theme and image for *Every Perfect Gift* are wrapped in the metaphor of the butterfly and chrysalis. Of all the metaphors of gift that could be used, why did we decide on this one?

To the ancient Greeks, the butterfly represented the image of rebirth and freedom. The word they used for butterfly was *psyche*, and if you are thinking that sounds familiar, you are correct! It also means spirit. The humble and beautiful butterfly contains the philosophical and spiritual idea of the soul breaking free from its shell – free to discover, to inspire, to create, to communicate, to share.



These are also spiritual gifts, gifts that when we free ourselves to serve in the world, we need and share with others; and they are gifts of our stewardship. As we share our time, talent, and treasure with our church and with the world, we unleash those same gifts in our communities: discovery, inspiration, creativity, communication, sharing. Through the ministries that are enabled by our gifts, the inspiration we show to our neighbors to unlock their generosity in the world, and the stories we tell about ourselves and our experiences, we participate with God in an abundant vision for the world. Every perfect gift comes from God above.



THE EPISCOPAL NETWORK FOR STEWARDSHIP

Every Perfect Gift



The Gift of Relationships

Maria joined her nearby Episcopal Church many years ago, deeply moved by the liturgy and the way her church looked at faith and Holy Scripture. She became very active, began teaching Adult Sunday school, eventually heading up the adult Christian formation program. Then 'Life' stepped in. After going through several personal and family crises, Maria found herself attending church less and less. With her faith at its lowest point ever, Maria felt she had no place to go for help. What surprised her the most was that **no one from church seemed to notice she stopped coming.**

So, she decided to wait until someone from church called to check on her. Twice the annual pledge campaign letter arrived in her mailbox like clockwork, with pledge card duly enclosed. But the letter was always addressed, "Dear Member of All Saints Church." **Into the trash went the anonymous letter and pledge card,** and *Maria's relationship with All Saints Church.* What is most sad about this story, however, is that **the loss of Maria from All Saints Church was entirely preventable.** An active TeleCare ministry at her church would make it extremely unlikely that this story would ever happen.

In short, TeleCare ministry is a lay-led ministry that expresses your church's care and concern to every member—and "permanent visitor"—on your parish membership list. You call with one question: "We're just calling to see how you are and if there's anything you want us to pray for?" That's it. *Best of all, it's free!* All it takes is a little organization, commitment, and people who are willing to call others, to pray with them over the phone and remind them of your congregation's love for them. Such a small act upholds the care for others demonstrated in today's lesson from James, and the Gospel lesson, looking out for those new to the faith. Unfortunately for All Saints, Maria attends a different church now.

Developed in the 1990's by the Rev. David Davidson-Methot and Deacon Fran Sweet in California, **TeleCare ministry is a true form of stewardship:** It is the care and tending of *relationships*. Bestselling author Brené Brown writes, "Connection, along with love and belonging (two expressions of connection) is why we are here, and it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives." Jesus models for us the ideal of self-giving relationships, relationships based on mutual love, compassion, and respect, which is essential to being human. Elegantly simple and lacking presumption, *TeleCare ministry fosters that sense of connection* in that it is an expression of the church's love and belonging for its members.

Do you feel called to start a TeleCare ministry in your church, to prevent a story like Maria's from happening? If so, please send me an email for a free PDF that outlines a basic form of TeleCare ministry, with ideas for training callers and practice scenarios. Discover how this "phone call of love" might be just the thing your people need from their church following a year of COVID-19 induced separation and isolation. | tens.org

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Was there a time when someone contacted you just at the right moment in friendship and love? How did it change you?



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The Gift of Wonder

I was the kind of child who asked a lot of questions. The world fascinated me, I was filled with wonder. As a consequence to my inquisitive nature, I learned a lot.

Many kids are like this, asking questions about the world around them, testing the relationships they have experienced. Not only do children ask questions, but they expect answers, and they expect answers that are true. Until children learn to find other sources for information, answers are all they have.

The loss of the innocence of childhood brings an end to asking questions, for some. We become awkward, second guessing our understanding. “Maybe I should know the answer, already?” “I don’t want to be the first to ask.” “They’ll think I’m not paying attention...” We replace the act of wonder with the practice of worry.

Three years ago, our congregation made a special effort to include children in the annual pledge campaign, offering each child the opportunity to have a conversation about their giving and their hopes for the church. We learned two important things: Children are generous – we had 100% participation from the kids, each one of them turned in a pledge card. (And, the treasurers will be happy to know that we had 100% redemption rate on the pledges, as well!) The second thing we learned, was that the kids had lots of suggestions for ministries, ways to volunteer, ideas about church. Filled out in crayon or pencil, each pledge card was a touching, deeply theological, beautiful expression of generosity and hope – of love.

When Jesus suggests that we must receive the wonder of the world and the work we are given to do as children, I think the example above is exactly why. We must get back in touch with our sense of wonder, of possibility, of love. These are the basic skills God needs from us to work in God’s vineyard. | tens.org

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How do you reacquaint yourself with your sense of wonder when you realize you might have lost it through the trials of life experience?

How does feeling hopeful impact your generosity?



Every Perfect Gift



The Gift of Sharing

Jesus looking at him and loved him – Mark 10:17-31

Some years ago there was a Cracker Jacks commercial. In it a grandfather is enjoying a box of the popcorn snack. He hears his grandson enter the house and hurriedly hides the box. He asks his grandson, “What did you learn in school today?” The grandson responds with an expectant look on his face, “sharing”. Grandpa who is not quite ready to share his snack then asks, “Did you play any games at school today?” The grandson repeats “sharing”. Grandpa reluctantly shares the box with grandson who then pours some into his own hand and turns to leave until Grandpa asks “sharing?” and extends his hand. Grandson happily shares.

When I was a child, this was just one example of what it looks like to consider the needs of others and our response to them. No matter where we lived, our home was a haven of rest or refuge for those with varying degrees of need. It could have been giving food to Miss Florene to assist her in feeding her family; or serving as a temporary home for Miss Alice’s children when their parents were engaged in domestic abuse situations; or caring for newborn twins experiencing narcotics withdrawal due to a mom who struggled with addiction. It could have been providing our living room as a guest room for someone in need. Or it could have been ensuring there was always a place at our table for the unexpected guest. How often do we look at another and love them?

The love of God comes to us in various and sundry ways. When we look at our neighbors, family and friends through eyes of compassion and love and act with a spirit of gratitude and generosity, we recognize with God all things are possible. When we acknowledge the personhood of the other, particularly those who society would deem the least or the last person one would offer a place at one’s table, then that person becomes the first to receive an invitation. We experience God’s love most fully when we are able to give of ourselves for the good of others. | tens.org

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

If we were asked, **What did you learn in Christ today?**, would our answer be “sharing?”



Every Perfect Gift



The Gift of Helping a Stranger

Last summer, I ran out of gas at a gas station. The car stopped moving a few yards from the pump. To my great relief, another customer came over and offered to push my car to the pump.

Before this kind, young person drove away, I shouted “Wait!” and hurried toward him.

He shook his head from side to side. “I don’t want anything for helping you,” he declared.

“Not even homemade chocolate chip cookies?” I countered.

He laughed, took the bag of cookies, and thanked me.

When we share the gift of being human beings together, especially in difficult moments, we slip into an awareness of abundance. We feel full. We know goodness given and received. Travels continue. Cookies and laughter are enjoyed. Every good gift comes from God, and in sharing our gifts we become even more gifted, whether or not we are recognized or rewarded for sharing.

Sometimes we step up to help from a desire for recognition. We offer our gifts, like James and John in today’s Gospel text, out of loyalty to Jesus and a desire to be useful. Our egos may be attached in healthy, or unhealthy, ways.

Sometimes we share a gift without expectations. We give without needing recognition. We push a car for a stranger and get a tired priest, her daughter and two dogs back on the road to Vacationland.

Making an annual financial commitment to a congregation is like offering to push a stranger’s car to a gas pump. It gets ministry moving. We seek no recognition, yet are rewarded in surprising ways. We offer our gifts because doing so creates the type of world we want to inhabit – a world where strangers collaborate and laugh together during a frustrating and embarrassing experience, sharing every good gift along the way. | tens.org

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are you a person who easily receives gratitude or compliments from others, or do they make you feel shy? What is it like to be recognized for your giving?

