

Over the years, a movie I've come to love is "Field of Dreams," in part because of my love for baseball, but also for the great messages in the film about fathers and sons, and also about what it is that drives us.

The main character, Ray Kinsella, is a corn farmer who keeps hearing strange messages to go the distance, to ease his pain, and that if he builds something people will come. Eventually he discerns that he is to build a baseball diamond on his farmland, and after he does so the legends of the diamond from years gone past begin to arrive.

However, Ray is still unsettled. No one can see the baseball players save for him and his family and a writer, Terrence Mann played by James Earl Jones who Ray brought to Iowa. Seeking answers as he faces possible bankruptcy on his farm and frustrated at not being invited with the baseball players who disappear into his corn to see where they go as he is not invited, he demands to know "what's in it for me" as he argues with Shoeless Joe Jackson played by Ray Liotta. Shoeless Joe though questions him though asking him "is that why you built it Ray? For you?" And he helps him to see that the strange voice that says "if you build it he (not just they) will come" is in fact about his pain that he carries having not reconciled with his father before he died. And at the very end of the film, as the baseball players vanish, one remains - a young Yankee player who is in fact Ray's father. And Ray realizes that through his acts of giving and sacrifice, he receives so much more in return than he could have imagined - but it required an attitude of selflessness.

The reality is when one gives with no strings attached, giving away love and mercy as God does, it's amazing at what it can do.

Take for instance the real-life story of what Anthony Clark decided to do for a Muslim family.

Anthony who is from the midwest married a woman who was raised in the Middle East despite being born in the Midwest. Shortly after they were married, her cousin Zaid came to their town from Baghdad to attend grad school at the University of Missouri. It was halfway into the Iraq War, a time when the situation in his country was growing more desperate by the day. Zaid was eager to settle in and start the process of moving his wife and two young daughters out of Baghdad.

It took several months, but he was finally able to arrange for his family to join him in Missouri. Before coming to the United States, Zaid had experienced a taste of the Western world, and he admired many aspect of life in the West. He was grateful for the opportunity to live in the U.S., and study at an American university. His wife, Shah'laa, at least in the beginning though, didn't share his enthusiasm for the West. Anthony reflected that was apparent from the first time he met her that she came from Iraq harboring some strong negative feelings about America.

Her attitude wasn't something Anthony experienced in any of the Iraqis he'd met before. When he had visited the Middle East, everyone treated him warmly. Shah'laa in contrast

was very cold. As he would later come to understand, she had been deeply affected by the events in her country. She arrived in Missouri in a state of shock. She'd been forced to live in conditions no one ever should have to endure.

Even before Anthony had met her and her daughters, he was aware of an incident that was shocking to them. A guard at a checkpoint shot at point blank range someone in the car in front of them. While they were let through, it was clear this had impacted her seeing a cold blooded murder as one of their last memories before arriving in America.

Knowing what they had been through, Anthony was especially cautious with her at their first meeting. He says he felt a certain kind of responsibility since he was the first American she and her daughters would officially meet on US soil. He felt he was representing his country and he wanted to show this Iraqi woman a different side of American than she'd seen up to that point. He wanted to show her genuine hospitality.

As if the trauma at the checkpoint wasn't enough, it turned out that the suitcases she had checked at the Baghdad airport were lost in transit, meaning she and her girls arrived with nothing more than a few carry-on items. Zaid had accumulated a few possessions during his months in America but he lacked most of the things necessary to sustain a household. Luckily for him and his family, Anthony happened to know someone who was skilled at acquiring things quickly and cheaply.

The day after Zaid's family arrived in Missouri, a large truck pulled into the driveway of the apartment he'd rented for them. Driven by his brother-in-law, the truck was loaded from stem to stern with furniture, clothing, bedding, towels, pots, pans, plates, utensils, small appliances, decorations, food, toys and other miscellaneous items. Anthony always knew his mom had a knack for finding bargains at yard sales but this time she had outdone herself. When she heard that Zaid's wife and daughters were coming to the area and that they had next to nothing, she went on a mission. Within a short time with help from her sisters and a few co-workers, she managed to procure everything a family of four would need to get a household up and running.

Anthony was shocked by the quantity of goods his family delivered to the door that day. Shah'laa stood and watched while his brother-in-law and Anthony unloaded the truck. Glancing over at her from time to time, he could tell that she was confused, perhaps even troubled by what she saw. Anthony and his brother-in-law had already assured her that these were gifts; there was no expectation of repayment. Even though his mom and helpers got the items at discounted prices, the truckload was still worth hundreds of dollars, a sum greater than the family could afford to spend at the moment. The value of it might have been weighing on her mind, but it seemed there as something more behind her unease.

At one point, she saw her place her hand on her husband's shoulder, stopping him mid-step. Leaning toward him, she proceeded to say something to him in Aramic: an emphatic question, it seemed from her tone. Later, he would find out what her question had been to him.

“Why are they doing this Zaid? Why are they being so nice? They are Americans?”

At the time of his writing, it had been several years since the family moved to the US from war-torn Iraq. Over time, Anthony saw her attitude toward America and Americans change. She became close to her neighbors and others in the community. She's come to appreciate landing on US soil, and she has people here who care about her. It took her uprooting her whole life and moving several thousand miles to come to know the real America, but now she finally does. Anthony reflects she knows the true spirit of America, and he is proud of his Missouri-born and bred family for the way they welcomed an Iraqi family to their home in the heartland.

It goes to show you what love can do, but for all this to happen, we have to love as God does, and not ask “what's in it for me,” but rather use the love to ease the pain of a world that is in so much hurt.

Jesus in our Gospel gives a challenge. He asks us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you. He says if you just do good to those who do good to you, what good is that, for sinners do the same, and if you lend expecting repayment what good is that, for even sinners to the same.

The point is that we as humans sometimes can have a hard time not asking what's in it for me to ourselves, even with respect to giving gifts. We often expect a thank-you note or some response. Or perhaps we'd want to give something back to the giver to out-do what they gave us.

Now don't get me wrong. Thank-you notes are appropriate. Giving a gift is a nice thing to do. Loaning money and expecting repayment can be a matter of justice. But one thing we always have to be on the lookout for is making sure we don't, even subconsciously, do things for the sake of getting things in return. We have to have this attitude though of giving freely and cheerfully. We have to have the attitude of Christ, who, you'll remember from last week and the call of Peter, meets Peter where he's at and does not require Peter to do anything to merit His love or grace, but rather gives it freely.

So how does one live this out?

As a starting point, remember that the love of God is always a free gift. We are sinners, we let one another down, we make mistakes - but God is not giving us His love with any strings attached. However, we are called to respond to that love and love like Jesus.

Start by looking at the people closest to you, namely your family. How do you love them? Most parents don't give their children a bill for raising them. But keeping up the attitude as the years go by requires introspection. Ask yourself what is your attitude towards others in the family. Do you do extra chores because it's the right thing to do or because you maybe are hoping someone will reward you with a present? Do you help

your kids or aging relatives and avoid resentment? Do you do something for an extended family member and expect something in return such as at Christmastime?

When we take it a little further and include people at work or at church, there are so many things we can do to give and make a huge impact.

For one, we can refrain from giving harsh judgment. Jesus says “stop judging and you will not be judged” and “stop condemning and you will not be condemned.” As I reflected on a couple of weeks back, we can judge if we ultimately want to help people, but if that’s not the case and we are just judging to put someone down, we need to refrain from that.

But then we take it up a notch. Not only did Anthony not judge his neighbor for being of a different culture, but he freely gave to help her along with others in his family who helped her out. And what a difference it made. I see the same thing here at Saint Joe’s. People give so freely to serve our parish in so many ways, and there is never a “what’s in it for me” kind of attitude. Take our 150th anniversary book, in which you’ll read many stories of this mentality over the years. The book came to be through the efforts of a dedicated group of people whom we are honoring at the 8:30 a.m. Mass and will be enjoyed for years by people in our parish. The reason they did this was not to have their names put front and center, but so that people could appreciate the history of their parish and have something to enjoy. And whether its funeral ministry, serving on a commission, being a catechist or a Samaritan minister, or putting together a school gala, the story is all the same: people do these things to help build up our parish family. This is the kind of attitude we need to have in all that we do!

At the end of the movie when Ray meets his younger father who asks him if this is heaven, Ray says “no, this is Iowa.” But he asks his dad if heaven is real. And he says “oh yeah” and when asked what’s it like, he says “it’s where dreams come true” to which Ray says “well then maybe this is heaven.” I can’t say whether there is baseball in heaven, but I do believe that in heaven is no disunity in the body but perfect love between God and all of the saints who love Him and one another. God has called us to build something so the people will come - not a baseball diamond in a cornfield, but to build up His Kingdom which we pray to do every time we say the “Our Father.” What’s in it for us? Love and mercy. Something we are freely given, and called to freely give.