

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Year C Cycle

Readings: Readings: Habakuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4 | 2 Tim 1:6-8, 13-14 | Luke
15:5-10

One of the things we are challenged with is loving without exception, and giving without exception, meaning the love that God gives us is meant to be passed on, not given expecting something in return. And certainly that can be sometimes pretty hard to do as we all deal with people who are not that lovable in our lives. But when we realize faith isn't something just for a select few but rather faith is a gift God offers to all, we come to realize that we use that faith to give glory to God through our actions of selflessness.

One Christmas, Frances Cromartie, who is a retired judge from Ohio, came to see this truth with respect to a parishioner at her parish. She asks at the start of her story: "Have you ever been a part of something that made no sense to you at the time but turned out to be an unforgettable life lesson? That Christmas I didn't understand what was happening. I didn't really put it

all together for some time, but what I learned about myself—and Mr. P—is a lesson I'll never forget.”

Her Christmas to-do list that year was overwhelming. Nailing down last-minute details threatened to draw all the holiday spirit out of her. Still, the one thing that always made the mad rush bearable was her shoe boxes.

It was a tradition she had started in memory of a cousin, the very first recipient of one of those boxes. Each year Frances would look for 10 people, folks who were in nursing homes or had lost a loved one or just seemed lonely or in need. She would fill a shoe box with little gifts—lotion, deodorant, toothpaste, socks, lip balm, soap and tissues. She would then tape 20 one-dollar bills end to end and roll them up tightly into a tube and for fun, throw in a windup dollar-store toy.

After wrapping each of the gifts in leftover wrapping paper, she would put them in the box and top it off with a handwritten note, “Always remember, God loves you.” She never signed her name. That was part of the satisfaction. The hidden joy.

By Christmas Eve that year, Frances had only five boxes left to hand out. She knew exactly who would get them—five older members of St. Margaret's. She rushed to the parish hall just before the 7:30 p.m. service. The holiday reception was winding down. She spotted four of her intended gift recipients in the hall. The fifth was nowhere to be seen. Maybe that person would show up soon she thought.

She needed someone to be Santa's helper. Right then, she spotted her friend Jim.

"Can you keep a secret?" She asked.

"Sure," he said. Frances explained what she wanted him to do. They went to the hallway, where she slipped him the four shoe boxes. She stashed the last in a corner. Then she made small talk with some friends and watched out of the corner of her eye while Jim made his way around the room. Each time he stopped, there'd be a look of surprise. "What? For me? Who's it from?" "Why, Santa, of course," Jim would say with a chuckle. Soon everyone was laughing and enjoying themselves.

Everyone except one man, whom she refers to simply as “Mr. P.”

Mr. P was one of the most difficult people she had have ever met. Ornery and persnickety were some of the nicer words people used to describe him. He was sitting by himself at the refreshment table, dressed in a red flannel shirt and tan slacks with suspenders.

He'd done quite well in business—he drove a hard bargain, folks said—but he was much less adept when it came to relating to others. In small groups at church, if the leader wasn't assertive enough, Mr. P would hijack the discussion, stringing sentences together on whatever interested him without seeming to pause for breath. If someone wrestled the conversation back to the proposed topic, he would interrupt and continue trying everybody's patience.

Frances had little tolerance for him and was only too glad when he started going to the earlier Sunday service. She went to the late one. She didn't have to see him. And she hadn't. Not until now. There he was, sipping eggnog. People were polite, pausing to say hello, but nobody wanted to sit next to him and get sucked into a conversation.

The service would start soon. Frances went to pick up the last shoe box. It looked as if the person she had intended to give it to wouldn't be showing up. What would she do with it? A voice inside her head had a suggestion: Give the box to Mr. P.

There were a thousand reasons why Mr. P did not deserve this present. He wasn't needy or in a nursing home. He didn't seem lonely. Not at all. To hear him tell it, he was never lonely because he was such good company for himself.

Give...the...shoe box...to...Mr. P, her inner voice insisted. No way!

Frances responded emphatically. Giving him the box would be absurd.

Finally she put the box away in the cloakroom along with her coat and went into the sanctuary for the service.

Everything was beautiful, with the scent of fresh pine boughs, candles flickering, the altar transformed by a sea of poinsettias. Frances took a seat in a pew near the middle, just before the choir processed in, singing carols. The feeling of Christmas seemed so near! All of the stress of the season faded in the tidings of joy. But she couldn't stop looking at Mr. P, who was

sitting several pews ahead of her. Though people were sitting on either side of him, he seemed so isolated, so utterly alone. Maybe her inner voice knew something she did not.

All right, Frances told herself. I'll do it.

They reached the portion of the service where people stood and greeted one another in peace. Frances slipped out of her pew and asked Jim if he would agree to play Santa's elf one more time. "I'd like to give that last box to Mr. P," she whispered.

"No problem," Jim said. "His son is coming to pick him up. I'll give the gift to him when I walk him to the car."

"Don't you dare tell him who it came from," she said. "Just say it was Santa." Back in the cloakroom, Frances fetched the shoe box and handed it to Jim. She enjoyed the rest of the service and didn't give Mr. P another thought.

Later that winter, she heard some news about Mr. P. His health had declined, forcing him to move in with his son. Soon he was telling anyone

who would listen how unhappy he was with the arrangement. Another Christmas came and went, and then Mr. P and his son seemed to disappear. That spring, Frances learned that Mr. P had died in Florida, where his son had moved for a job.

The next Sunday, Jim and Frances talked about Mr. P. “You know I had to tell him that you were the one who gave him that box,” he admitted, somewhat sheepishly. “He wouldn’t accept any other answer. You know how he was.”

It took her a second to remember what Jim was talking about. “Of course,” she finally said. “The shoe box.”

“Mr. P wanted to thank you in person,” he continued, “but he never ran into you. He said no one had ever given him something without expecting anything in return. That’s the way it was in business and life. He kept asking, ‘Why did she do that for me? I need to know why.’ I didn’t know what to tell him.”

Frances struggled to come up with an answer, recalling that Christmas Eve night, the ill will she had felt toward Mr. P.

“I didn’t want to give him the shoe box at first,” she said. “I thought he didn’t deserve it. I thought there must be someone worthier.”

Then it dawned on her. She hadn’t given the shoe box to Mr. P at all. God had, over her initial objections. She’d finally complied because she had to give the box to somebody. It was God who gave the gift to Mr. P.; Frances just delivered it.

Mr. P has been gone for several years now, and strange as it might seem, Frances says she misses him. She often thinks of him when she assembles her Christmas shoe boxes. She’s reminded of how people can be like gaily wrapped presents; what’s inside can’t always be deciphered. Their hearts, their minds, their needs can be a mystery to us. But sometimes we’re given a glimpse of just what God sees, what we are blinded to. Sometimes God uses us to help him love the people we think are unlovable. Like Mr. P, who needed a gift that Christmas more than anyone.

What Frances came to realize through this moment was how her actions manifested her faith, which had increased through the encounter with Mr. P as both her and he changed for the better.

This week's Gospel has the disciples asking for Jesus to increase their faith. Right before this Gospel begins, Jesus has talked about caring for the vulnerable, warning those causing a child to sin would be better off having a cement coat and being hurled into the ocean, and then saying forgiving seventy times seven or always. So the bar is set pretty high, and they are understandably basically saying "this sounds pretty tough, any advice?"

What Jesus then teaches them in understanding of faith. Namely, faith has to go deeper. A slave who plows in the field and then makes a meal for the master is doing what he's expected; he's not going above and beyond.

Similarly, if we're just showing up to Mass or going through through the motions, our faith can become stagnant. Our faith is also not dependent upon our good works; meaning I do this, you do that. Faith is a free gift given to all, and the works we do manifest that. So what the disciples need to do is just act on the faith they have. According to Jesus, serving God is

its own reward. Serving others and not one's self characterizes life in the kingdom of God. The model for this kind of service is Jesus himself. He dedicated his whole life to serving others. His service was total, even unto death on a cross. This is not the way the world in which we currently live works. Neither did it work that way at the time of Jesus.

So what I'd invite us to do is to think outside the shoebox if you will as we think about this Gospel, and ask ourselves how can we strive to go above and beyond? Two things that come to mind are first, to challenge ourselves to give freely as a way to glorify God. As I've said before, one of the great things I've seen in our parish is how people do just that. This Harvest Festival that we've had this weekend has come together, and one thing I have not heard from anyone the past few years is a complaint that it's too much work, or not worth it. I've also never heard requests; I gave this to the auction or I donate this much can't you do this for me. Rather, people have turned out for the festival and worked so hard not for recognition, but to bring people together and to help the parish. What a beautiful testament to what faith is all about. But as we look around and see the many good things happening here, the challenge is to live these out; to look for ways to give of our time and talent throughout the year both to our families and to

our larger human family, and to do these things always with the same reason in mind, namely letting God's love flow through us. From doing chores not just to get an allowance but to help out, to helping kids with homework or making a family meal, to volunteering in the church, all of these things we do that go unrecognized or uncompensated we must remember are there for God's glory.

Second, ask yourself who needs a shoebox filled with gifts in life? Not the gifts that are wrapped up, but the gifts of compassion and mercy. The other day I visited a home and celebrated anointing of the sick, but also there was a parishioner who had visited this person a number of times because they serve as a Befriender Minister; meaning they bring the person Communion regularly but also spend time with and get to know people. By opening our eyes to see the spiritually needy whether a person is lonely, or maybe just seemingly not too lovable like Mr. P, we can do so much good for one another.

And lastly, we again always remember God's love is given freely to all without exception. Nothing we can do can merit God's love. But what God's love can do is to bring about such an incredible change in people, as

evidenced by Mr. P who was dumbfounded that someone did something for him without wanting anything back. As I said, we all know a Mr. P or two or three, but we must also try to know them not as our eyes see, but rather, as Frances put it, how God sees them, and pray for the living and the dead, to work on forgiveness and strive not to just love those who are lovable, but look for the good in all and ask for God's helping finding it in others when it's hard, and that God would help those people come to see better how to respond to the love they have been given.

The Welsh poet and priest of Church of England George Herbert in his poem "Love" writes:

'And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says, Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat.'

As we do the same thing and eat of the Body and Blood of Christ, may we too serve like Frances did, remembering that when God comes to us, He serves us simply because He loves us, both the good and bad, and uses

His love to transform us. Eating of this perfect gift of love to us, may we do the same for one another.