

Sometime in the spring of 1982 or so, my parents got me a new bike. How fun it was to ride and go up and down the sidewalk. But after a few months passed by, and the next year roll around, my parents decided to have me try something new: ride without training wheels. I ended up toppling over pretty quick. It certainly seemed like it would be much easier to have the safety of the training wheels. But they knew something I didn't at the time: they were holding me back. Sure, I could go down our sidewalk. But to ride a bike without those training wheels would allow me to ride further with them on their bikes. And, so we spent a bit of time along Victory Memorial Drive, and eventually I began to keep my balance and ride. To this day I sometimes talk about it with my parents and we get a laugh remembering the elderly neighbors who watched me that summer, who mom says came out and said "hey he finally got it.!"

It was but one example of so many times my parents, and then other people in my life, helped me to find something deep down inside of me. Namely the gifts that God has given me. Each of us as we are told by Paul in our second reading are given different gifts. The question is how do we use our gifts for His glory, and help others to find theirs?

You might know the name Al Roker; he came after Willard Scott on the Today show and is a well known weather forecaster. But what you might not know is that while he loves being on TV, what he loves even more is being a dad. And through his son Nick, what he's found is a deeper faith in how Nick lives out his faith.

A couple of years ago, he writes how he and Nick had spent a weekend at their house in upstate New York. His wife, Deborah Roberts, is a senior correspondent for ABC News. Nick's sister Leila was at college, and his oldest sister, Courtney, is grown. Sometimes it's good for just the two of us guys to get away, he says. That drive up and back is some of the best time they have one-on-one. As Roker puts it, when you have your teenager in a car with you, it's a good chance to connect—if Nick doesn't spend too much time distracted by his iPad or phone. Focus and conversation can be a problem for his son, more so than most kids, as he is a kid with special needs.

It was a Sunday and they had gotten up early—not his usual 3:45 a.m. wakeup for the Today show but still pretty early. They were driving back to Manhattan and hoped to make it in time for the morning worship service

because back home, at St. James Episcopal Church, Nick is a crucial part of the worship team and he takes his responsibilities very seriously.

It's not something Deborah or Al would have expected he says. To see Nick process down the center aisle at the beginning of the service, carrying the cross, his eyes on the altar, their pastor and the other ministers following behind, the organist pulling out all the stops, the choir and congregation singing their hearts out, the other acolytes following his lead as the principal cross bearer. Nick is focused, dignified, reverent, the brass cross shimmering in the candlelight. "You must be proud of your son," someone will say.

Yes, I am, Al says. More than they'll ever know. The obstacles in his son's way were things that might have tripped up many others. Not Nick, not even with the disabilities he was born with.

That morning, driving into town, Al looked at the dashboard clock and considered the traffic—where was everybody going so early in the morning? But he was determined they would make it. He knows it's important to his son. Recently, explaining to Deborah why being at church

was a priority for him, Nick told her, matter-of-factly, “Mom, I’m a churchgoing guy.” Not your average teenager at all.

Al went to church when he was growing up in Queens, but in those days, everybody did. It was expected. His mom and dad took the family to worship every weekend, but in so many other ways Al’s dad was not your typical 1950s dad. For one, he was really in touch with his emotions. He cried easily, laughed hard and hugged and kissed his kids a lot. He remembers going off to college, to SUNY Oswego, in upstate New York, getting his first taste of freedom. That day he left, Mom put on a brave face. Dad was a puddle of tears.

The comfort he had with his emotions was a good model for Al when he entered parenthood. Children can test your patience, he says. Even an even-tempered guy like Al can raise his voice. But he always knew he was loved. Dad’s hugs and kisses said as much. Al tries to do the same. He says he doesn’t always succeed, but with Deborah’s help and cajoling, he tries.

When Deborah and Al got married, they knew we wanted children. His older girl, Courtney, was adopted during my previous marriage, but we wanted to add to our family.

Along came Leila, who he says was a walking miracle. They wanted to tell the world. They were just as thrilled when her brother, Nick, was born, four years later. He too was an answer to prayer—like all children—but they knew right from the beginning that he would be up against a whole different set of challenges. He wasn't developing as fast as he should have, not holding our fingers as tightly, not always meeting our gaze, not as quick to crawl. At three, he hardly talked and could barely walk.

Doctors and specialists put him through a slew of tests. Was it cerebral palsy? Autism? Maybe it was a processing disorder. Now that he's 17, I can tell you that, yes, he's somewhere on the spectrum and maybe obsessive-compulsive. But those labels can be frustrating; they don't begin to describe who Nick really is.

He started working with speech, behavioral and occupational therapists, developing strength, conversational skills and mobility. They enrolled him in

a program at a school to suit his needs, watched him make friends, signed him up for tae kwon do—at his insistence—and took him to Sunday school. Roker had my doubts about the tae kwon do, but Nick blossomed, far more than Deborah or he could have ever expected, given his original iffy prognosis. He proved to be very competitive. “I’m going to get my black belt,” he told his parents. And sure enough, he did earn his black belt—Leila got her red belt, one notch below. Deborah and Al were pleased for both of them. After that, though, Nick decided he’d achieved his goal and was ready for other challenges. Since then he’s been taking swimming, chess and basketball lessons. But faith was what really mattered so much to Nick; for He wanted to serve God. And so he got even more active. He’d been involved in a lot at the church, and Al noticed that on Sundays when he was feeling really down about Nick—wondering where our son would find his place in this world—he found it a comfort to note that some of the acolytes also had special needs. One performed his duties in a wheelchair; another had Down syndrome.

Nick watched and wanted to join them. And the folks who oversaw the acolytes were happy to have him.

Al says he's seen how kids' minds seem to wander during worship—even his does too sometimes. But ever since he's become an acolyte, Nick has the clearest focus, Sunday after Sunday. Those qualities that you might think would hold him back are exactly the ones that drive him forward. If Al thought tae kwon do was all about form and purpose, so is this. Lighting the candles, carrying a torch, holding up the Bible for the lesson to be read and marching down the center aisle with the cross, concentrating on that altar. On Sundays he serves the Lord.

In his son, Al sees a hard worker who is full of love to share.

Like all parents, there are moments of frustration. But he remembers to his own dad, how he raised him and helped him find his gifts, and his wife Deborah reminds him that he has to show his son not only that he loves him but that he likes him as well. More than that, though, Al says he admires him.

He closes by saying let's be clear about something: When you parent a kid, it's not just the two of you; there's a third party helping. I can't begin to take

credit for who Nick is and who he might become. All sorts of specialists can tell you about limitations for this and that. Nick never got that message.

Last year, he went on a mission trip to Haiti with teens from church, helping out at an orphanage, reading to the kids, playing games with them, doing chores. When we picked him up at the airport, the first thing he said in the car was “I can’t wait to go back.”

Until then Al says he has to make sure they get to church on time—no matter what. After all, my son is a churchgoing guy. But so is Al.

Roker is right, in that there is a third party, not just in parenting but in our lives helping us in all that we do. And the takeaway is that God acts in our lives to help us, both to find our gifts, but also to help others do the same.

In life, things can quickly fall apart and become stressful. Weddings in the ancient world were multi-day events, and a key component to them was wine. People enjoyed celebrating, and the wine kept the party going. So running out long before the party is over would be a very big deal.

Jesus has come as a guest, not really to do a miracle. As such when Mary says to Him they have run out of wine, it comes across almost as a little rude when He says what concern is it of His yet; as if he's saying please don't cramp my style I'm just here to enjoy the celebration. But as we see in the story, Mary, a bit like Al and his son Nick, trusts that God will act to help them through the situation. And indeed, God does act, hearing Mary's intercession.

As we hear in the Isaiah from the first reading, God delights in us; we are the bride; God, in Jesus, the bridegroom. And that's important to remember when life gets us down. Sometimes its through our own fault; for a long time the people of Israel refused to cooperate with God's purpose, despite the prophet Isaiah and others trying to get them on the right track. But now in that first reading, the people have learned - and God was there all along. There had been exile, but now the relationship with God is restored because God is love. God is a bridegroom who is overjoyed to be with His bride, which is you and me. And other times in life, through no fault of our own, the wine jars run empty. The six jars would have held about 150 gallons, a lot of wine. But think of being a parent - how many parents whether Al Roker or any other are just running on empty with the schedule

and busyness and housework and so family drama and so many other things. In this, God intervenes. The key though is to listen to our blessed Mother: “Do whatever He tells you.” Israel didn’t do that for years. And how often in life we don’t do that; go back to Adam and Eve. We want to do it our way, whether we’re a rebellious teen or a stubborn adult. But when trust God loves us, but also listen to Him when He says do this, don’t do that through our conscience, what we will find is things will work out. So when we are stressed or wonder “how did I get myself into this” when we look at decisions, we take comfort that God is there to fill our souls back up with His love. But we also must remember when God says “I want you to be a parent; I want you to have that tough conversation with that person; I want you to address this problem in your life; I want you to grow up and mature” or whatever it might be, we need to listen to our Blessed Mother and do what God asks of us. Al did that when he discerned to become a parent, and what happiness he found.

But with that too, we must never forget each of us has such incredible gifts. What I love with this story of the wedding at Cana is how it reminds us of how we work with God and bring what we have to Him. There’s Mary, who intercedes as we do for one another. But even the miracle, notice Jesus

doesn't magically make the wine. He turns water into wine. In real life, Saint Augustine reflected on this and pointed out how water eventually becomes wine too through the rain falling on the field to invigorate the vine that produce the grapes that are crushed and fermented. On our part, we need to find our gifts and use them, both in determining our vocation, but in the simple things we do every day. People like Al Roker do that every day, partly on camera, but more so as a loving father to Nick and his two other kids. But through his love, he not only used his gifts, but he helped Nick discover his - from being a black belt in tae kwon do to thriving as an acolyte in his church. So many parents do that for their kids, and when we are patient and loving towards others both in our families and with others we know, we can do so much to help people discover the tools that God has given them to build up the world.

It wasn't much fun at the time getting rid of the training wheels, but it was important to take a tumble or two so I could be truly free to ride a bike with enjoyment. In life, sometimes we want to cling to our safe spaces too, or only see the setbacks. Jesus though sees our potential and knows that with Him at our side, we can use what we've been given to get to heaven. God knows how hard life can be, which is why He came to us. Jesus is the

fulfillment of what Isaiah hoped for. But Jesus is also with us every step of the way through life. The Eucharist is God again filling our souls so that we can have the strength to get through life, not alone, but with our bridegroom. So let us turn to Him trusting that He gives us His love and strength, filling our souls to the brim, and use what we have been given to live abundantly and, working with Him, help one another to do the same.