

Reflection 2

October 16, 2016

What if life itself is God's gift?

My husband's first gift to me was a very large stuffed dog. It was Christmas, and we had just started dating, and we had just started getting to know each other. I did not have the heart to tell him that my allergies had always kept me from developing a great love of animals, and that stuffed ones had a similar effect on my sinuses as the real ones. I kept it on my bed for a month in my attempt to not hurt his feelings. When I finally did tell him that it was not quite my idea of a great gift, I could have been kinder. Marc was so gentle in responding. The gift was still a gift, and he was grateful that I had received it, but mostly, he was grateful that I cared about the one who gave it: him.

I had a lot to learn about gifts from Marc's family. In my family, socks and replacement kitchen appliances are great gifts – practical and necessary. In Marc's family, a gift is something deeply personal and a form of communication and love. I have learned a great deal from both of our families about who God is, but it is Marc's family that has revealed to me the way that God gives gifts with a generous abundance. God's gifts are bigger and more extravagant than I am comfortable receiving, and they invite me into a real and ongoing relationship with the one who gives them.

The first gift that God gives each one of us is the very gift of life itself. None of us chose the circumstances of our birth. We did not get to decide on the century, the country, or the circumstances of our existence. With the cooperation of our parents, God gave us the gift of conception and growth. From the very beginning of our existence, God relies on people to nurture, care for and grow this gift of life. We are the people who have the privilege of receiving the life that God gives as a gift.

Like the large stuffed dog I got for that first Christmas with Marc, sometimes it can be difficult to see the beauty of the gift of life. Sometimes, pregnancy is unplanned and scary. Other times, that life includes illness and disability, either temporary or permanent. Always, life will have an end, that requires us to let go of the very gift that God gave in the first place, and death gives way to the promise of eternal life.

In Deuteronomy 30:15, God delivers a simple message to His people. He says, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses...choose life." In giving us the gift of life, God also gave us the gift of freedom and He has allowed us to make choices. Our choices have the capacity to bless and build us up, and also to tear us down and destroy us. What we say yes to is up to us.

As people of faith, the Church invites us to celebrate and welcome the birth of every child conceived as a gift. In saying no to abortion, we get to say yes to brave single mothers, intergenerational families, and adoption. We are called to support programs and practices that allow for all children to have adequate food and drink, shelter, security, community, love and an environment suitable to education and growth. We get to say yes to birth for every baby, and even more, we get to say yes to their abundant life. Life will inevitably bring the challenges of illness, inability, and disability, either for a season or in an ongoing way. Our faith invites us to care for the sick, to

recognize the humanity and dignity of people who face life with the extra challenges of inability and disability. While some of us face these challenges for a lifetime, all of us will face them at some point in our lives, and be invited to receive the gift of allowing others to care for us in our weakness. Our God invites us to look for the gift in each person, regardless of their ability. We get to say yes to the joy that spills out of people who live with Down's Syndrome, and yes to the intelligence and alternative ways of thinking offered to us by people who live on the Autism Spectrum. We are privileged to care for those who cannot care for themselves because we are also in need of others' care.

At the end of our lives, each of us will be asked to give up the very life we have been given. Dying is life's last work and we are invited to say yes to the lessons of living to the end. We get to say yes to accompanying the dying through their last days. We are the people who long to ensure that the dying have adequate care and company, to speak words of gratitude and encouragement, and to receive the wisdom, fears, and last words of the people God has placed in our lives. As God's body on earth, we are privileged to walk with the grieving, to assist them in loving their people even unto death and beyond it.

Receiving life as a gift from God means that we say yes to all the uncertainty and possibility that comes with each life, responding as gently and faithfully as we can to the messiness of it all. When we see it as a gift, however, we are less likely to think we are entitled to control, health, ability, or ease; instead, we are people invited to unwrap each new circumstance and ask how this too can help us to see and know the Giver of the gift more clearly.

We have faith in a God whose love, mercy, and presence is big enough for all the circumstances we will face in this life.

- What are you grateful for in the gift of your life? In the lives of others?
- Where do you see suffering and pain that challenge your faith?
- Where have you been inspired and encouraged by people who have come through great difficulties with great faith?
- How are you inviting God into your suffering, to shift your perspective, give you hope, and bring new life out of ashes?

This article is the second in a series of four, where we will be exploring what faith invites us to say yes to, in response to God's desire to give us abundant life.



Author Leah Perrault has been a fumbling but faithful disciple of Jesus longer than she can remember. She and her husband, Marc, and their three children are living life in Saskatoon, building sandcastles, spending time with friends and family, and reading stories before bedtime every night. Leah works with Emmanuel Care (a Catholic health organization) and travels across the country on the side, writing and speaking the words God pours into her heart. You can read more about her and from her at www.leahperrault.com.

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Reflection 3

October 23, 2016

What if the whole world and everyone in it is a gift for us all?

While working for the diocese of Saskatoon, one of my responsibilities was to be a part of the Diocesan Mission Office, a committee that promotes mission and organizes mission experiences. In 2010, the Office planned a mission to the Pine Channel Pilgrimage in Northern Saskatchewan, a week long mission on an island between Fond-du-Lac and Black Lake, with camp sites set up around an open air church constructed just for the annual mission. Our invitation was to come and assist with a vacation bible school program for the kids and simply attend the mission.

Flying into Fond-du-lac, and then boating in the rain over to the island was enough for me to come face to face with the reality that these beautiful, generous Dene people did not need me. Despite the remote nature of their community, the expense of living there, the challenges they faced, they did not need me. They knew it and so did I. It was awkward and difficult for me. My one-eighth Cree ancestry is buried deep beneath fair Irish skin and red hair. My preference for comforts like indoor plumbing and blow dryers was seeping out of my pores. I felt unworthy and uncomfortable.

One afternoon about midway through the week, one of the moms came in for the colouring session and sat beside me with her toddler in her lap. Freed from the pressure to find something to talk about, we coloured, wrestled kids, laughed at the wonderful descriptions of the pictures. We began to share about our children, my pregnancy, her hope for more children in her struggle with infertility. We discovered our shared humanity. God sent us to find ourselves in each other. While on mission in the north, I learned that I have as great a need for love, service and belonging, as they do. We need each other.

The invitation to follow Jesus leads us quickly into discomfort. Jesus goes to the places we would rather not go, and hangs out with people we would rather avoid. He challenges the systems that create injustice and refuses to let us disassociate from the people affected by our decisions. In Matthew 25:40, Jesus gives a profound message in a parable: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

Everyone and everything in creation is a gift of God, bearing God's image and revealing to us the mystery of God. If we want to love God well, we must say yes to loving everyone and everything in Creation. We do this not because we are so great, but because we are as broken and in need as the least of these.

Jesus asks us to acknowledge that everything we have has been given to us. We deserve none of it, so it is ours only to give away and share with others. We give to those who have less than we have because we too experience poverty, and we need to learn to receive the gifts of the poor. When we keep the couch we have in order to buy a new one for a family of refugees, we get the opportunity to meet and know a family that has lost everything except their need to

cling to one another. We see in their need that asking for help for our own problems might be possible.

Jesus draws our attention to the violence of our world and invites us to speak for peace, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for an end to human trafficking, and child labour. When we make ourselves vulnerable by standing up against oppression, giving up some of our comfort, lending our power, privilege, and voice to those who have been held down, ignored, and silenced, we discover our own powerlessness, the illusion of our privilege, and the limits of our voices. We say yes to needing each other, and yes to a God who heals us when we work together.

God also gave us all of creation. Every tree and breathtaking sky, every forest emerging again in tiny green shoots after a fire, every shape and kind of creature (even mosquitoes) have been fashioned to give God glory and give life to the world. Creation is our home and our playground, our teacher and our work. It provides our food and our shelter. Our existence and quality of life depends on our care of the earth. Every time I look at a can, opened to feed my family, and choose to toss it in the garbage instead of rinse it for recycling, I defy the gift of creation. Every time I let my car idle, leave the lights on, and buy something I do not need, I fail to follow Jesus. And when I stop trying to be productive, head out into the park and roll in the grass with my kids, I say yes to the God who created this beautiful planet.

Our lives are a lesson in how to love deeply, abundantly, and without exception; our faith tells us that even suffering can be a great teacher. There is no person who is not worthy of our care, no creature too small or annoying not to be marvelled at, no injustice that is not our business. The Church challenges us to be people of care and compassion, to be peacemakers, and protectors of the earth. In caring for the prisoner, the unborn child, the slave, the abused, the elderly, the sick, the broken, the rejected, and the earth itself, we discover more deeply the God who cares for us.

- How do the injustices of the world tug at your heart and conscience?
- What is God asking you to do with your discomfort?

This article is the third a series of four, where we will be exploring what faith invites us to say yes to, in response to God's desire to give us abundant life.



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Reflection 4

October 30, 2016

What if our bodies are also gifts?

As a young child, I remember being aware that my body is a place where I encounter God. When running, my asthma would flare up, I found myself begging God to help me breathe. When I discovered the miracle of reading, I remember thinking what magic it was that letters could paint pictures in my mind. When puberty arrived and I felt the flood of hormones and longing to belong to someone, I knew almost instinctively that God must have a great gift in sex, even if He asked me to be patient in the midst of an emotional storm. I struggled with worrying that I wasn't tall enough, thin enough, or pretty enough to be loveable, like many others do, but I faced those challenges with a strong counter experience that my body was, in fact, good.

Our bodies are a gift from God, so that we can taste, see, smell, touch, and hear our way through the gift of life. They are the way we identify with ourselves, connect with each other, carry out our mission and purpose, effect change, and surrender. As humans, we are always body and soul, making our way through life and meeting God right here in our own lives and experiences.

As I arrived in early adulthood, I discovered that many people have not experienced the goodness that God intends for our bodies. They have been beaten, wounded, assaulted or nearly destroyed by words, actions, circumstances, and systems. It is a painful thing to know of a child raped by his father, who now carries a lifetime of wounds that go beyond the hours in the darkness. It takes years and back-breaking emotional labour to rebuild confidence and a sense of security when an eating disorder robs a woman of her sense of herself. When sexual identity and desire do not line up with what everyone else experiences as "normal", the isolation, shame and fear rob lives by depression, addiction, and suicide – every single day. Sin and evil carried out on and in our bodies causes profound spiritual pain as well.

It's a sensitive thing that our spirituality is so tied up with bodies and sexuality. Since we are created in God's image with bodies and souls, male and female, we cannot escape the reality that living and loving are deeply connected to our bodies and our sexuality. Our sexuality is so personal, so appropriately private, so deeply intimate, that anyone commenting on it almost always feels uncomfortable and invasive. Our culture has suggested that sex is at once both casual and very important, that our own instant gratification is the highest priority. The Church's reverence for the mystery and power of sexuality can feel restrictive, like an overwhelming no to something we instinctively long for and know is good.

God created us with bodies and they are good. In following Jesus, who came to us in a human body, we are invited to make authentic peace with our bodies and our sexuality, to say a deep and intimate yes to the way we have been created, to the goodness that God wrote into our unique bodies and our longing for love, belonging, and intimacy. As Paul asks the first Christians, we are also asked: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, who was given to you by God?" (1 Corinthians 16:19)

In following Jesus, we get to say yes to the beauty of every body, in every shape and size, every colour and ability, every state of health and disease. We can never lose our dignity, because the human person, revealed to us in the body (regardless of its state) has the dignity

of bearing the image of God. We say yes to caring for and loving people by the way that we care for their bodies, even in death. It is perhaps most difficult to do this with ourselves. Jesus says yes to your body exactly as it is. He invites us to make peace with our bodies, to refrain from damaging them. Making peace with our bodies, with their capacity and their limitation is a first step to allowing our bodies to be a gift for others, in service, in relationships, and in sexual expression.

We get the privilege, in following Jesus, of saying yes to chastity, which I define as the art of waiting on God's time. Chastity looks like my child learning to wait until someone is ready to share that toy with them rather than demanding it prematurely or worse, just going and taking it. Professionally, chastity is expressed when I work with my colleagues toward change at a pace that we can move together, rather than forcing change in a way that causes damage to relationships in the name of profit or efficiency.

In sexuality, chastity means not just saying no to sex outside of marriage but learning to be patient with our own longing and desire. It means saying yes to waiting, to holding tension, to experiencing unfulfilled longing, for now and sometimes forever, even when this longing is overwhelming. Within marriage, it is being patient with one another when there are differences in sexual desire, waiting on the right time for children, grappling with infertility, waiting for one another to grow and learn the lessons that God is teaching, even and especially when it would be more gratifying to force what you want.

Following Jesus is saying yes to wrestling through my issues with my body, myself, my sexual longings and hurts so that my interactions in all human relationships are peaceful, respectful, honest and authentic, made possible by his healing presence. It has been my experience, even with a fairly healthy experience of my embodiedness that these issues are painful to work through. And so we get to say yes to walking with God and with each other very gently and with much compassion when it comes to issues of body and sexuality. We have not always done this well, and we need to work together to say yes to knowing, reverencing, experiencing, and loving the gift of our bodies as well as those of others'.

- Where do you see your body and sexuality as a gift?
- What is difficult for you about your body and sexuality?
- Who else in your life is blessed by the gift of your body?
- How is God inviting you to wait on His time as you live with your longing and desire only some of which will be fulfilled in this lifetime?



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