

Reflection 3: What if the whole world and everyone in it is a gift for us all?

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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.