

Reflection 2: What if life itself is God's gift?

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My husband's first gift to me was a very large stuffed dog. It was Christmas, 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 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 the people. God 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 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 life in abundance. 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 and protect 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.