

“Let Us Be”
Rev. Sara Ascher
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‘Tis the season of giving. Or so the TV, radio and newspaper advertisements tell us. Buy, buy, buy...give, give, give...get, get, get. Over the past few weeks, if you are like my family and friends, regardless of which Holiday you are celebrating, you’ve been hunting high and low in shops or online for the perfect gifts to give. But giving is not always easy. We want to give just the right thing, home-made or bought, funny or relating to a favorite hobby; we try so hard to match gift to person. It’s just that sometimes it doesn’t work out.

“Once,” writes Glen H. Turner, about Christmases of his childhood, “I was given a hatchet, a metal hatchet. Someone really slipped up and I was dizzy with excitement. And once, I was given a drum. Adults don’t make mistakes like that very often. I cherished those gifts. In fact, I think I broke the drum before the month was out. At least, I think I was the one who broke the drum. One year I was given a crystal radio set before I even knew what a wireless was all about. It was a terrible gift. It took a couple of days for my older brothers to put it together and then it didn’t work. It was the most special gift I received that year (as far as my parents were concerned). And, though I never understood it, and it never worked, I didn’t get any replacement. But, that’s OK. Sometimes, as a kid, I was able to buy presents for other people and would watch their blank stares as they opened my gift to them and tried to figure out why I had gotten it and how to look grateful. It takes awhile to learn what and how to give.”

Most of us have been there, adult or child, either receiving a gift that isn't quite what we wanted or something we simply don't like; or being the one who gives the gift and realizing from the person's face that it isn't what *they* like or wanted. Giving isn't as easy as all the advertisements make it out to be. We are annually plagued with the questions of what to get people we care about or for whom we feel obligated to give a gift. The perennial questions of what to get for the person who has everything or the in-law we don't know well; did we get that for them last year, or do we have enough money to even buy anyone anything this year. Sometimes the whole idea of giving and celebrating through giving doesn't seem quite worth all the bother and trouble.

The act of giving is much more complicated than simply whether we like someone enough to spend our hard-earned money on them. It is about the balance of caring for self with the care of another. Giving is about offering to someone something of what we have, whether through money or effort or time. It is a decision on our part to offer to someone else something of ours. This is not always easy nor does it always feel good, even though we know it to be the right thing to do and especially when we are very aware of what it is we giving away.

"I think of something very nice that I could do," the child in the story *December* says, "but I try not to listen to the thought, and I don't want to do it. I put out my hand, and pull it back, put it out again, and lift the Santa plate."

It isn't easy to give to another what we have worked hard for and set aside for ourselves. Giving to someone else something that is precious to us goes against our instincts and our self-interest. But that is what the Holidays are all about. Giving not

just what we have plenty of, but what is precious to us; whether that be time or money or a green Christmas cookie. It's about giving even when it's hard to.

But that doesn't mean it's all about money. It was just as hard for the wealthy Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, to give to the poor as it was for the child to give to the old woman the cookie. Granted, Scrooge was harder and meaner and it took three ghosts, visions of the hard, cold consequences of his actions and words, and one long night before his heart would melt with generosity and warmth could pour forth from him. Whereas, the child did eventually, though reluctantly, offer the cookie. It can be harder when one has so little to give up to someone else the precious little you have. But it can also be those with little that give with the greatest pleasure, because they are so aware of what the gift means.

Giving isn't only about how much you have it is about how much you perceive you have. If Scrooge and the child both believed themselves rich with gifts (money & cookies enough to share) then they may have found it easier to offer to others what they had. But like Turner wrote, "it takes awhile to learn how to give."

To learn how to give - to give like the mother did - the gift of shelter in their humble home and the warmth and comfort of a heavy coat. To give as the old woman did - a small shabby flower shared for the sake of the beauty of a tree. To give as though there is endless coats and flowers, as though it costs the giver nothing.

That is the hard giving. Many of us are like the child perpetually aware of what we are not keeping in order to give. That is the struggle of giving. We want to give and yet, we want as well. Of course, there is much that might be easy for us to give to

others: things we don't like or don't use; things we no longer value or fit. But how easy would it be, how easy is it, for us to give what is precious to us? Could I give my favorite shoes, the ones I saved up in order to buy to someone even if they were my last pair? If I knew I couldn't buy more? I would like to think I would, but I am not so sure I wouldn't be reluctant in the giving or miss them when they were gone. Would I spend my one day off, after weeks and weeks of working, somewhere I may be needed instead of at home reading my latest mystery novel? I would like to think so, but can I do it without resentment? Again, I would like to think so, but "it takes awhile to learn how to give."

"Let us be that stable," Patrick Murfin declares. Let us be that place where the stranger is welcome. This is a call to give - to give more deeply than through gifts wrapped in pretty paper, but of ourselves. It is about offering to others what we have; not only as individuals, but also as a faith community. We must be that manger that holds out our hands of welcome and offer to those who come weary and hungry for truth a religious community in which to seek, a place where hopes are nurtured, a home to bring the gifts of who we are to and let them stand before Wonder. So let us then be that stable, let us be the church that is learning how to give.