

As Christians we understand that all that we have, all that we are, comes to us from God. As scripture tells us, *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights ...* (James 1:17). And yet sometimes “God,” this “Father of Lights,” can seem like such a vague entity that we lose sight of that great giver entirely. Perhaps this is why Jesus reminds us over and over, to look for God in the reality that is all around us — in the bird, in the flower, in the very air we breathe, in each person; and not only in those who come to mind quickly and readily — the ones who mentored us day after day or who led us through our formative years — but also in those who might be easily forgotten, the ones who perhaps touched us briefly, and yet deeply; maybe like a passing bird. My sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Jennings, was one such person for me. As a child, I was painfully shy; being called on in class was enough to turn my face beet red, and I recall spending the year in dread that I might be forced to serve as a Safety Patrol; something that weirdly excited all the other kids. And so, at her first parent-teacher conference my mother asked Mrs. Jennings the same question she asked of every teacher — whether I was making any progress in terms of outgoingness. Mrs. Jennings (I still love her for this!) responded by saying “Mrs. Bennett, what’s wrong with a quiet child?” With one brief statement, she eased my mother’s worries and she validated me. Suddenly, I was okay, just as I was. In that moment, and still today, I see God in Mrs. Jennings; a God who loves, accepts, and can use me just the way I am.

I did not have to be a Safety Patrol to please Mrs. Jennings and I do not need to be someone I’m not in order to please God. And that is true for each one of us. With our various unique characteristics, traits and foibles, God loves us unconditionally; and even frequently uses those specific traits we’d rather be rid of in order to help us develop and grow. Knowing such unconditional love fills my heart with spontaneous gratitude. Still, there are times in life when gratitude is not spontaneous. For instance, how are we to be grateful during times of great loss or tragedy? How is it possible to have a thankful heart while suffering the effects of an accident or while grieving the death of a loved one? At such times, gratitude can come only by conscious *choice* made through the grace of God. But this choice is not a false pasting on of a smile when one’s heart is breaking nor is it the sappy, forced expression of thanks when everything seems to be falling apart. Gerald Fagin, S.J., a well known leader and teacher in Ignatian spirituality, notes that “Genuine gratitude is not a naive or simplistic view of reality that fails to recognize the suffering and challenges of life. Rather, it views reality in the larger context of the radical giftedness of all of life ...” True gratitude is an underlying attitude of faithfulness even in the midst of suffering; a *graced choice* to rely deeply on the One from whom all of life comes, and in whom all of life rests; and in this, it provides a basis for hope in times of joy but also in times of great sorrow.

For Christians, this gift of genuine, deep gratitude flows through Christ. It comes to us not through trite channels but rather by way of the cross. For this reason, Ignatius and many of the great mystics and teachers, understood it as foundational for every season of life.

*What characteristics do you have that you would rather be rid of? Looking back over your life, can you see times when God has used that particular trait to help you grow or to be of service to others?*

*When and how have you seen the grace of God in the midst of personal loss or tragedy?*

*Elizabeth Goodine, Spiritual Director*