

Unexpected BLESSING

What we learn
from people who
can't pay us back

DANIEL DE ROULET

I don't know if any of you, perhaps at school or at work, have moments when the work is done and you find yourself trying to look busy. Some of us have this problem more than others. I'm an English literature professor at North Park University, and even though I have a demanding job, apparently I'm not always the best at looking busy.

I know this because one of my sons, when he was in first grade, was participating in a session when every child in the class explains to the teacher and to the other children what their father or mother does for a living. When it was my son's turn, he stood up proudly and said, with confidence, "My dad drinks coffee and reads books!"

I now have a task at my church, as chairperson of the Ravenswood Community Daycare Board, in which almost always the work has been done by other people and my main task is to somehow look busy, or simply to look like I'm doing something to help. And so, when I'm feeling particularly guilty about what I'm not doing, I get in my van and drive down to the church and I visit the operation.

Now, I like visiting the church and seeing our church secretary in the office, or talking with our pastors. And I like talking with our day-care director, Adrienne, and pretending that I can be of some help to her in running the operation. But, I'll confess, the real

reason I visit is to see the children. There is nothing like seeing a young child whose smile or mere presence can transform a room, and who is evidently happy and content and secure in their environment, like the children we serve at the day care are when we see them in the arms of the center's caregivers.

There are other moments, of course, when ministries such as this do not go so smoothly: when a city of Chicago construction permit has been long-delayed, or when one of the children or their parents is not doing so well, or when the monthly budget is not looking so good, or when the operation is just struggling with the day-to-day realities of ministry and service.

At times like this I am reminded of a passage of Scripture from the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 14, Jesus was invited to dinner at the house of a religious leader. Such leaders of his day were concerned not that Jesus was doing good things, but that he was doing them in the wrong way—like healing on the Sabbath Day, which obviously was doing good but which also seemed to disregard religious law and tradition.

They were also concerned about who was at the house that night—what positions of prominence they held in the community, and whether they had been given places of honor fitting their titles at the table. Jesus talks to them about these things, and then adds something else.

Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not

invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14).

Jesus had a habit of saying things that both are hard to do and don't seem to make much sense: love your enemy, bless those who curse you, don't lend to those who can pay you back but give to those who have no chance of being able to repay you.

And we understand these things, I think, even though they are very hard to do, as part of what it means to be a Christian and to take what Jesus said seriously. Our world is full of enemies who are hated instead of loved, and the hating doesn't seem to solve anything. And it is full of stressed-out people, many of them apparently driving cars (and sometimes they are us) who are much more eager to curse than bless, and who just may desperately need a break instead of a curse in return.

Changes in our Ravenswood neighborhood in Chicago, which is rapidly gentrifying, are leaving those who don't have much means without affordable homes and goods and services. We have people here who can't afford day care without subsidies, or children who need love and stability in their young lives from eight to five, or teen moms and dads whose lives have taken an



INGS

I think that Jesus wants us to serve those who can't pay us back in order to teach us something.

unexpected and a difficult turn. And they can't pay us back. But we understand that, as Christians, God calls us to stand in the gap and minister to these folks who have been left behind by the rest of society.

But there's something else about this kind of ministry—something other than the good and sometimes self-satisfied feeling of rolling up your sleeves and doing what you know God wants you to do. It's not that God doesn't have the means to help people directly; instead, I think that Jesus wants us to serve those who can't pay us back in order to teach us something. As we stand there in the day care, looking into the eyes of the little children who can never repay us, and who don't even have a clue of the amount of cost and sacrifice it takes to put together a day-care center, we get a very good idea of how God feels about us and what God has done for us. We get a sense of how little we can appreciate the price of God's love and the depth of his care, and it reminds us that none of us can pay it back.

So perhaps when I realize that, and I no longer seek the place of honor at life's table but am grateful to have even been invited and offered the most humble seat in the house, then I understand that God loves the unworthy that serve and the unworthy that are served. I then get the point of this ministry that God has blessed us with here. □

Daniel de Roulet is professor of English at North Park University and attends Ravenswood Covenant Church in Chicago.