

## On Closed Doors, Burnout, the Giving and Receiving of Gifts, and Being Loved

by the Rev. Jane Cornman

Our Side Street Conversations group has been reading Parker Palmer's book, Let Your Life Speak. The book is about finding our vocations, revealed to us by God as the essence of who each of us is uniquely designed to be. At last night's gathering, we were discussing his chapter on what happens when doors close in our lives. When that happens, it is often because we are trying to give something based on a *should*, even if it is not our gift to give: "Give only if you have something you must give; give only if you are someone for whom giving is its own reward." He goes on to note, "Though usually regarded as the result of trying to give too much, burnout in my experience results from trying to give what I do not possess. ... It does not result from giving all I have: it merely reveals the nothingness from which I was trying to give in the first place. ... When the gift I give to the other is integral to my own nature, when it comes from a place of organic reality within me, it will renew itself — and me — even as I give it away."<sup>1</sup>

During the conversation, I was totally focused on issues of vocation, especially the particular situations and gifts of each person in our group. But as I drove home, I noticed how interesting it was that our conversation about gifts and gift-giving had taken place just four days before Christmas. And I noted the irony of the fact that at this late date, my reflections were being punctuated with panicky interruptions about my incomplete Christmas shopping: which presents did I still need to get, how I was going to get them, and how I was going to get them to their recipients in time? Because of the conversation we'd just had, I found myself asking, "Do I have what it takes to give what I want to give? Am I giving these gifts because I want to, or because I feel that I *should*? Are there gifts I could give that would be more genuine, and thus easier and more satisfying to give? (And might they, ultimately, have more meaning to the receivers?)" These are important questions for all of us to be asking during this season, especially if our gift-giving is becoming more of a burden than a joy. What is there within each of us that demands to be given, and creates joy for us as we give it away?

The further parallel, of course, is that God, as the creator and possessor of all, has everything to give, and is never depleted by giving. God's entire nature is love, and love *must* be given away. If we are indeed created in God's image, and if we experience joy in giving of ourselves, then we can imagine that God is filled with joy in sharing that love. That's what is so special about Christmas. God became human and came among us so that we could comprehend and receive God's love. There is nothing we need to do to earn God's love. It is freely and joyfully given by the One who is the essence of true love. Like anyone in love, God's greatest hope is that we will reciprocate. But like any truly healthy lover, God also understands that we cannot be forced (or even just convinced) to love in return.

As we struggle to become better givers, it may be that we also need to work on becoming better receivers. We need to ask ourselves whether we can believe that One as big and magnificent as God would actually notice and care about each one of us. We need to convince ourselves that there is really, truly, nothing that we need to do to earn God's love. And can we need to learn to receive God's gift without any sense of obligation. In other words, we are invited to simply dwell within God's love, enjoying it for what it is, and nothing more. And if we can do that, then we may discover that we are capable of experiencing the same joy with which it was given. That is a gift worth receiving, and it is also a gift that is most worthy of passing on to others!

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<sup>1</sup>PALMER, PARKER J. LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK: LISTENING FOR THE VOICE OF VOCATION, JOHN WILEY AND SONS INC., 2000, pp. 48–49.