

After days of texting back and forth, the potential buyer of a bicycle that had become our responsibility to sell had to back out of the transaction. The money they had been saving for the purchase of the bike had to go toward unexpected repairs on their truck. That is when my husband looked at me and asked, "Should we just give it to them?"

"Yes," I replied. Because I suspected that person was going to need transportation while their truck was being fixed. We had a bike. They need transportation. Therefore, we decided to approach this interaction through our economy of faith instead of the economy of greed.

The bicycle had come into our possession because its previous owner had found it abandoned. No one claimed it, even though it looked to be in good shape, so the finder took it home, thinking they would use it. But they didn't. Instead, they decided to try and sell the bike, thinking that would be an easy way to make some money and advertised its sale on social media. No one bought the bike. When it came time for that person to move, they didn't take the bike with them. They gave it to us to sell. A few weeks later one person expressed interest in the bike, although it was obvious they couldn't afford the asking price.

So, we did something the potential buyer didn't expect. We didn't treat them like a buyer. We treated them like a whole person. A person whose value is not based on the money they had in their possession. A person who needed transportation. We offered to give it to them.

When my husband texted the potential buyer we wanted to give them the bike they asked, "How can you just give it to me?" My husband replied, the original seller did not purchase the bike, so no one was losing anything. Even then, it was still difficult for the potential buyer to believe anyone would give something of monetary value away. But my husband finally convinced them, he's pretty good at that, and they came and picked up the bike. When they did, they said this experience got them thinking differently about things and when they didn't need the bike anymore, they might pass it on to someone else.

This isn't the first time I encountered someone who struggled with the concept of participating in the economy in a different way. Our pay-it-forward model in our coffee shop ministry can be confusing to people, which is why I am sometimes given the suggestion to do away with it. But I am not going to. Because when we were gifted the money to start this ministry, we were not asked

to use that money to start a coffee shop to help fund our parish. The reason for the money, given freely, was to experiment with participating in the local economy in a way that reflects our Christian values. That is why we take the time to explain to people without cash who can't pay for their coffee that the coffee has already been paid for. It is not to be confused with charity. There is no debt owed. We aren't going to track you down and demand the cost of the coffee with ridiculous amounts of interest added to it later like a loan shark. The coffee has been paid for so a person can have a cup of coffee.

It's a confusing concept only because we are used to a debt economy, paying later for something needed today. Instead of putting a person farther into debt to satisfy a thirst, we focus on satisfying the thirst. It is our attempt to participate in the local economy in a way that reflects our faith in Christ who said those who come to him will never be thirsty. This does mean our coffee is magic and if you drink it, you will never be thirsty again. Instead, what we are trying to do is show we don't believe Jesus would deny someone a drink and are expressing that by figuring out what it takes to provide a cup of coffee without having to shut down when the money that was given to us runs out.

While it is difficult to understand, we have had some beautiful interactions with people who participated in the pay it forward model. First, there are some customers who regularly stopped by and paid for someone else's coffee. There are some who received the pre-paid coffee and didn't come back. And that is okay. More often, however, those who received the pre-paid coffee do return and pay for someone else to have coffee. When I explain our model to clergy in the diocese who are looking to start a similar ministry, they get excited and say, "This is grace in action."

Still, there will always be those who can't understand, just like there were folks who didn't understand what Jesus was talking about in his bread of life dialogue in today's Gospel. We heard this confusion in their question: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

It is a question that reflects more than the religious leaders' conflict with Jesus in the Gospel. It also reflects one of the earliest criticisms against the church that it was practicing cannibalism. This criticism came from taking the words of Jesus literally and not understanding Jesus was talking about salvation in a different way than people were used to.

Even today we human beings can misunderstand salvation by trying to make it fit into our concept of a transactional economy. Some religions do function on the understanding that if a person gives something to a god, like one of the Greek or Viking gods, that will get the attention of the god who will do

what is asked, like provide rain for farmers' fields or fish for fishermen or safe journey. A bad harvest was then blamed on the person for failing to fulfill the needs of the gods.

Christians often substitute this magical thinking in our prayer lives; believing if only we pray every day God will answer our prayers by doing what we want. Or if we go to church God will let us into heaven when we die, or prevent us from getting sick, or making whatever outcome we want a reality. We must be careful with magical thinking; it can give the illusion we can control something we have no control over. Like the athlete who thinks they win games because of the socks they wear. Life doesn't work like that, nor does faith. And when we try to force that transactional economy onto God, we can miss how God is present with us no matter what life brings.

That is what Jesus was saying in his bread of life discourse and how he answered the question. Jesus can give all of himself because God is not a practitioner of Friedman capitalism. God's economy is based on love. It does not start with what we give, it starts with the love God gives us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Humans may need food to sustain life that is defined as breathing, eating, and reproducing. But eternal life isn't about reproducing. Eternal life is life with God present. It is life that bases value on people as God's beloved, not how they can benefit us.

Let me give you another example. It's one some of you may have heard before. That's okay. About three years ago, one of our cats died. His name was Porter, and he was how my husband and I met. One day Porter snuck out of my apartment and Michael and his daughter found him and brought him back to me. About three years ago, Porter was diagnosed with cancer, and we cared for him for over four months. It was hard sometimes but it was also so very good. At the end of every day of those four months I prayed and thanked God for another day with Porter, whether it had been a good or bad day. The moment he died, I prayed, "God, we commend to you our beloved Porter." Then, I felt totally, utterly, completely empty. I had no prayers left. No energy to pray. No desire to talk to God. Don't mistake that emptiness for a loss of faith. It was exhaustion.

The next day I was driving into the church. It was gray, sunless day in Athens, like so many days in January. Unexpectedly, the clouds parted slightly, letting some sunlight through. This sunlight touched a metal keychain dear friends had given me that had a picture of Porter engraved on it. When the sunlight touched that keychain, it refracted the image of Porter, making it appear on the car visor as an image of light.

At that moment I knew I wasn't alone. God was communicating with me in the language of light. And I was a little less empty. And I learned something important: when I can't communicate with God, God doesn't abandon me or get offended, God picks up the slack and communicates with me. Because God values our relationship.

This is my story, but that doesn't mean I am the only person God does this with. God is with you no matter what you are going through, even if you don't see images in light, that doesn't mean God isn't there. That is why I share that story, to show you when we aren't trying to control a situation, we might be able to glimpse how God is present.

It is also an attempt to help us engage in the question the religious leaders brought up in today's Gospel: How can Jesus give us his flesh to eat? Perhaps the simplest answer is: By giving all of himself to us, even when we chose to crucify him because it was too hard to comprehend and accept a God we can't control with our prayers, thoughts, or actions. A God who instead wants our actions, thoughts, and prayers to reflect God's love and presence in the world. It's an economy of faith based in God's love freely and completely given to us.

That is why we pray for those we may not like. That is why we operate our coffee shop ministry on a pay it forward model. That is why we do what we can to make room for and welcome people regardless of their age, race, political leanings, economic status, gender, or orientation. That is why we celebrate Holy Communion. That tiny, thin wafer isn't enough to satisfy our physical hunger like a chocolate donut will. And that tiny sip of wine won't quench our thirst like a long, cold drink of water. But that isn't what the bread of heaven and cup of salvation are supposed to do. They are a pay-it-forward taste of Christ who gave himself for us, is with us through whatever life throws at us, and a reminder for us to embody that same bread of life within us to the world, to remind everyone that they aren't alone. God loves them, just as God loves you.

Whether it's a bike, a cup of coffee, an image in light on a gray and cloudy day, sometimes giving can reflect God's presence and offer hope to those who need it.