

Devotions inspired by the insights of children

"I'm going to live from now to maternity."

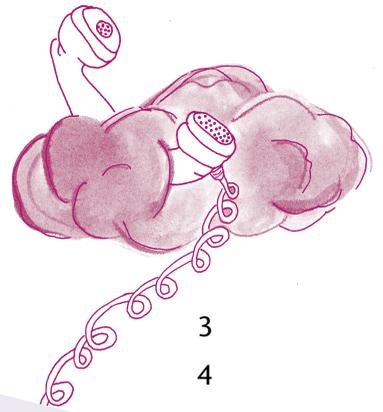
"I don't know, Mom, I wasn't there."

"Mom, I'm glad you happened to me, too."

"Daddy, you need a time-out."

Out of the mouths of babes

By Barbara Gove Gill
Nancy J. Stelling, editor



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Editor's Preface

I first met Barbara Gove Gill almost 20 years ago when she wrote a fine program on peace for a predecessor churchwomen's organization and I had the privilege of being her editor.

As life too often goes, we lost track of each other—until about a year ago when a mutual friend, Ruth Bergstrom, saw to it that our paths crossed again. Ruth told me of Barbara's most recent history: how as she was busy being a dotting grandmother, she was diagnosed with cancer and was currently undergoing an aggressive regimen of chemotherapy, with no sure prognosis for success. But Barbara, always a student of life and God's grace, wasn't done with life yet, not *until* (and who knows, in God's economy of time, maybe not even *after*) she could write that piece she'd always dreamed of writing—a series of devotions based on the marvelous insights of faith that only children, in their closeness to Jesus and God, seem to grasp. "Could we somehow help in getting her piece published?" Ruth asked.

In these 21 brief offerings you will get to know something of Barbara's family . . . and their wonderful grasp on life and God's grace.

Thanks in large part to Women of the ELCA, you now hold that piece in your hand, *Out of the Mouths of Babes*. In these 21 brief offerings you will get to know something of Barbara's family—including Jimmy, her son who died of cancer as a youngster—and their wonderful grasp on life and God's grace that makes them part of God's compassionate community.

With enormous courage and stick-to-itiveness, Barbara wrote these devotions during the most difficult stage of her cancer treatment. She wrote them first as a legacy to her family, but always with the hope that a wider dissemination of them could empower other women, especially with the idea, the permission, the boldness to do something similar. All of us, including those of us who are not mothers, have children who are special in our lives. What kinds of stories would you weave together, as a legacy for your family and friends, about those lessons of faith learned from children? Barbara, with all her might, would say, "Go for it."

These devotions can be used in a variety of ways: for personal reading, as devotions at the beginning of a meeting, or with your own family. And, if you like to dig deeper, consult "Beyond the Door," placed after each devotion. There you will find some brief questions, comments, ideas that we have added for you to reflect on, wrestle with, and enjoy. Blessed reading!

—Nancy J. Stelling

Author's Preface

In times past, God spoke to us through prophets, through his Son, and then through apostles, disciples, and hundreds of clergy and philosophers and teachers through the years.

For centuries, learned and scholarly people have interpreted God's word and taught us what they thought God wanted us to know. I have read many of their books, listened to countless sermons and lectures. But none of them has touched me as the lessons I've learned from my children and their friends have.

Children have an understanding of God given only to the innocent. They see with clarity what God intended but what we adults have often obscured with rationality. Children often provide us with that "aha!" moment that is the beginning of true learning.

Like all frenzied and frustrated mothers, I have wondered at times how a loving God could give me children that acted sometimes like, well, *hellions*. Then there were times when I walked through nights of grief and anger and couldn't see the light of God's hope or presence.

Yet in those darkest times it was frequently the memories of lessons in faith learned from my children that helped me emerge from the darkness into light and life.

It is my hope that these lessons open the door for you to a deeper faith and trust in God and God's love. And if you laugh or smile a little in the process, so much the better. For a task begun with laughter—that most precious gift from God—somehow seems easier, as God disarms us and frees us up for the situation at hand.

—Barbara Gove Gill

Children often provide us with that "aha!" moment that is the beginning of true learning.

He Listens to You, Too

“and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6)

Jimmy had had over a hundred blood tests. His fingers were swollen and sore. He was understandably reluctant to have any more. At the age of eight it is hard to see any value in something that hurts so much.

Each day as we sat in the car waiting for him to muster courage enough to climb the steps to the pathology lab, I would tell him to ask Jesus to make him brave. After prayer he always found the courage to go in on his own two feet.

One morning he was particularly reluctant. I suggested prayer, but he said, “No, Mumma, ‘cause if I ask him, he’ll do it, and I don’t want them to stick me again.”

“I guess I’ll have to ask Jesus for you, Jimmy.”

“Mumma, that isn’t fair! He listens to you, too.”

We sat there awhile until finally Jimmy looked up and grinned through his tears. “Come on, Mumma. He did it anyway.”

He opened the car door and marched up the stairs to the lab. Jesus had done it again.

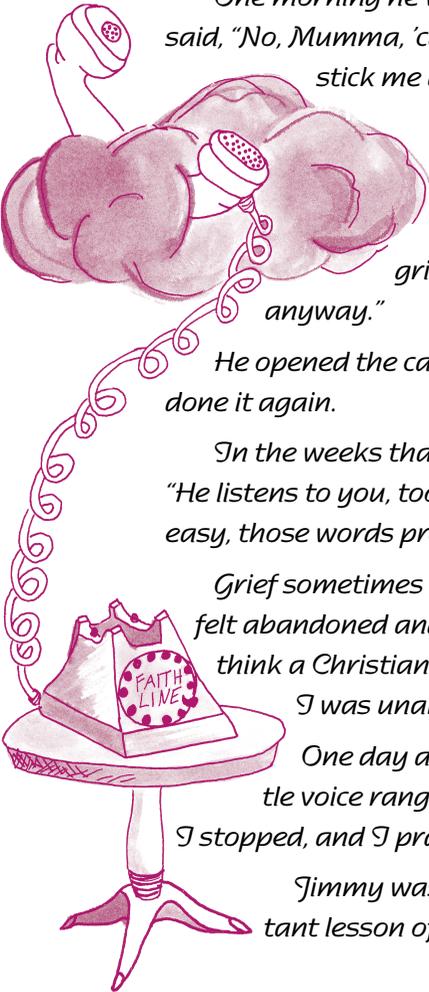
In the weeks that followed I often had cause to remember those words, “He listens to you, too.” As I watched him die, and prayed for it to be fast and easy, those words proved true. He did listen to me.

Grief sometimes chased the thought from my mind. Where was God? I felt abandoned and angry, and I suffered actual physical pain. I didn’t think a Christian should feel those things, and guilt piled upon guilt until I was unable to pray. I was totally bereft.

One day as I told a friend the story of the blood tests, Jimmy’s little voice rang clear in my memory. “He listens to you, too.” Right there, I stopped, and I prayed . . . and Jesus did it again.

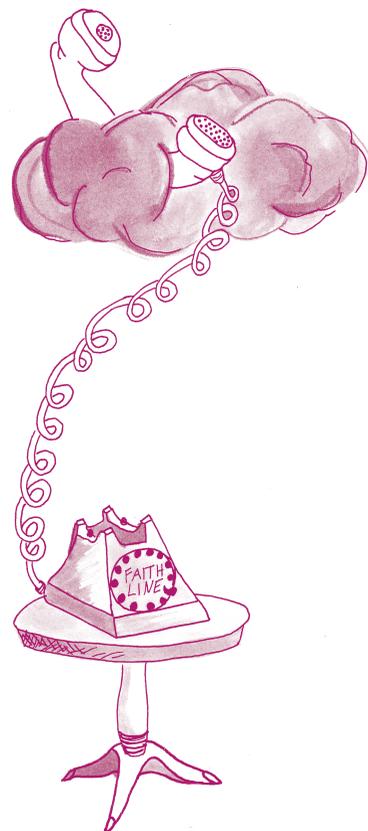
Jimmy was only eight years old, but he taught me the most important lesson of my life. I’ll never forget again . . . he listens to me, too.

(continued)



Beyond the Door

- 1.** Read Isaiah 11:1–9, to see the context of the Bible verse “and a little child shall lead them.” These verses present a beautiful picture of peace and nurture, as people and nature live together, without enmity, in God’s “Peaceable Kingdom.” Jimmy got a view of that peaceable kingdom early. Has a child ever blessed you with an insight, as Jimmy did for his mother here? Reflect on that experience. Share it with a friend, if you’d like.
- 2.** Listening isn’t always easy for us human beings—we’re pretty busy talking. Often we need to be reminded to listen. To listen because God is calling. Recall the last time you really listened.
- 3.** How could you make time in your life to listen to a child who is special to you? How do you think that such listening would make the child feel?
- 4.** How do you feel when someone really listens to you? Try this week to give a friend or family member the gift of really listening.



Putting First Things First

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

(Matthew 6:33)

Michael came running into the house in search of his dinosaurs. As he ran by me, I noticed blood dripping down his arm. His shirt and jeans were covered with spots of blood.

I stopped his headlong flight. “Michael, here. For heaven’s sake, what did you do to yourself?”

He looked down at his arm and in total surprise said, “I don’t know, Mom, I wasn’t there.”

After he’d been bandaged and had run outside again, I thought about his words. They were so typical of our son. He would get so totally engrossed in whatever he was doing that the rest of the world just went by without him.

But Michael isn’t the only one with that approach. Often I, too, fail to see what is going on around me when I’m so busy with what I’m doing. How easy it is to miss, or ignore, the feelings of others—the hurts, the fears, even the joys—because I’m wrapped up in my own interests. God could be shouting for my attention, and I wouldn’t be there.

Please slow me down, Lord, so I put first the things that should be first. Give me ears to hear and eyes to see the needs, the joys, the hopes and fears of those with whom I share this small portion of your world.

Beyond the Door

1. “First things first.” It’s good advice. How do you decide what gets priority in your life?
2. What role do “to-do lists” play in your life? And how do you feel about that?
3. Are you happy or unhappy with how you organize things in your life and what gets done or thought about . . . and what doesn’t? What might you do to make any needed changes?
4. Do you ever feel like Michael in the devotion—that you weren’t there for something that took place in your life?
5. How might you be “more present” for the moment? For others in your life? For yourself? For your God?

Prayer Perfect

“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you. . . .” (Psalm 141:2)

In the evening before the children were tucked in bed, we gathered around the Advent wreath for family prayers. Bonnie often had a petition for someone she knew who had a problem. Michael would sometimes confess a small wrongdoing, confident that if he confessed to God, then Mom and Dad would do nothing else about it. Nine times out of ten Jimmy’s prayer would be a heartfelt “Thank you, God, for a lubberly day.”

I bow my head in prayer every morning before breakfast, and I’m afraid that while I do tell God thank you, most of my prayer is either intercession or petition or confession. Maybe, subconsciously, I’m afraid that if I ever started listing all the things I’m thankful for, I’d never get to breakfast!

By the time I had thanked God for his love, shown in countless ways, his church, his daily presence, I’d be halfway to lunch. Then there are my family, friends, shared laughter, good health, innumerable blessings, not to mention my garden—and all the other wonders of God’s creation. You can see, I’d be past dinnertime and still not done.

Perhaps the best way is to echo Jimmy. “Thank you, God, for this lubberly day,” this year, this life. Thank you for each breath I take, each object I see, each loving word I hear. I am most richly blessed.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** What a “lubberly thought”: just thank God. Sounds like faith’s way of saying “Just do it.” And it’s not a bad thought. What would you thank God for right at this very moment? Just do it!
- 2.** Try asking yourself that question every noon for the next week. Then thank God for that particular gift.
- 3.** There’s an old German-English saying, “*Undanks* is the curse of the world.” You guessed it: *Undanks* is German for “unthankfulness.” Why and how do you think unthankfulness could be a curse? Talk about it with a friend.
- 4.** How would you answer the question: Why should we thank God? Try this question at your next circle meeting, and weave the results into an opening or closing prayer.

One at a Time

“The words of the mouth are deep waters. . . .” (Proverbs 18:4)

Michael at nine was one very proud Cub Scout. A visit to the Marine Recruit Depot was arranged for his pack. There, under the guidance of two drill-instructor sergeants, they would be put through the physical fitness routines expected of graduating recruits.

The first training goal was 25 pull-ups. Boy after boy tried, and some made it as far as 20. Then it was Mike’s turn. He was last because he was the smallest. No one expected him to do better than the larger boys.

Up he went, over and over. When he reached 26, the sergeants started counting them out, loud and clear. At 30 the boys started cheering. At 59 he dropped to the ground. The applause from the troop and the Marines who had stopped to watch was heady stuff for a little nine-year-old!

After it was all over and he came back to me, I hugged him and asked him how he had ever managed to do it.

“It was easy, Mom, I just did one at a time.”

Talk about wise words! When I get bogged down in too many projects and have trouble seeing how everything will get accomplished, I try to remember Michael’s wisdom: just do one thing at a time. Then it becomes doable—maybe not easy, but doable!

Beyond the Door

1. Recall a time in your life when you, like Michael, did something that no one else thought you could do. How did it make you feel? Share the experience with a friend.
2. Women especially are often prone to getting involved in too many projects, too many things to be done. To have a healthy balance of mind and body and spirit, some items on our “to-do list” may have to go by the wayside. How did you answer the first question in Devotion 2: How do you decide what gets priority in your life? Are you ready for some new priorities, including having some more time for God and your spiritual life? What can you do about it, starting tomorrow (or even today)?
3. Check out John 10:10. This verse has become the mantra for those wanting to have a healthy balance of mind, body, and spirit. How would you describe “abundant life”? Ask others to share their definition.

The Gift of Laughter

“Now Sarah said, ‘God has brought laughter for me. . . .’”

(Genesis 21:6)

One day Michael and Bonnie had a heated discussion about who would live the longest. Mike stated with assurance, “I’m going to live a hundred million years.”

“That’s nothing,” Bonnie rejoined triumphantly. “I’m going to live from now to maternity.”

“Living until maternity” was a family joke for years. Along with countless other moments of laughter, it has enriched and blessed our lives. Recalling such old jokes has been a comfort to us in our times of sorrow, a means to apologize for an unintended slight, an entry point for family togetherness after emotional separation.

Our children, or those of friends, have given us the gift of laughter more times than I can count. They remind me that a chuckle passed along to someone else who is feeling blue is probably worth more than all our bouquets or platitudes.



I’ve often wondered if Sarah conceived in her old age because she stopped complaining and laughed at God’s gift. A laugh can change our attitude about a lot of things. After all, Sarah lived until maternity.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** Recall a time when a child in your life stopped you short with his or her “humor-with-wisdom.”
- 2.** Did your parents, or others in your family, ever tell you about a humorous word of wisdom that came from your mouth as a child? If so, what was it? Reflect on it and talk about the experience with a friend. Ask your friend for a like example from her life.
- 3.** Make this kind of sharing a circle activity next time your group meets, and talk about the role of laughter in your life and faith life.
- 4.** Do you think Jesus has a sense of humor? What makes you think so?
- 5.** Do you think God has a sense of humor? What makes you think so?
- 6.** Why do you think people say, “Laughter is good for the soul”?

The Right Time

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

It never mattered what time we told Michael was bedtime. The response was always the same: “But I haven’t played.” His eyes could be at half-mast, and he still wanted more time to play.

Over the years whenever any family member had a job to do that he or she didn’t want to start, the comment was always, “But I haven’t played.” The same comment came after a happy day that was about to end.

As the years go by and I see all the exciting things I’ve never had time to try, or do, I want to tell God to stop the clock. “Hold it, God, I haven’t played yet.” I haven’t gone hang gliding or ridden in a balloon or bicycled through Holland. I haven’t written the great American novel or found a way to cure a broken heart.

Time is running out—and there’s still so much I want to do. Then I remember the way that Ecclesiastes continues, the part that my happy little boy exemplified in every way: “I know that there is nothing better . . . than to be happy and enjoy. . . . it is God’s gift” (3:12–13).

I don’t know God’s time schedule. Could be that I’ll ride in that hot-air balloon yet.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** God’s time—that time we all live in—is created for each one of us special children of God. Reflect on this thought: God has created time just for me! Wow—how does that make you feel?
- 2.** Have you ever prayed the author’s prayer: “Hold it, God, I haven’t played yet”?
- 3.** What haven’t you “played,” or done yet, that you’d like to do?
- 4.** When can you make plans to do what you answered in Question 3? Who can help you accomplish it?
- 5.** Who helps you with your dreaming in life? How do or could you help others dream about their “playing”?
- 6.** Sister Carol Frances Jegen, a frequent contributor to *Lutheran Woman Today*, says that playfulness is one of the components of Christian spirituality. How do you think she might be right?

Giving Thanks

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” (Psalm 107:1)

We were at a church picnic at the beach. Before we ate, the pastor stood up and gave the blessing. When he finished, we all started to eat, all except Michael. When I asked him why he didn't dig into his hot dog, he answered, “But Mom, we didn't tell God thank you yet.”

“The pastor did it, honey.”

“But, Mom, doesn't God want us to thank him, too?”

Our family paused, bowed our heads, and thanked God for our food.

God does want us to thank him and not just leave it up to a pastor or a parent or some other authority figure. Our four-year-old son already knew that a hot dog is a gift from God and that he had his own responsibility to give thanks for that gift.

God isn't the only one who appreciates a sincere thank-you. A smile and a grateful word for even a small courtesy recognizes the giver and rewards the effort. Children especially need that affirmation of their generous acts and small gifts. Too often we trivialize the many gifts given us in a day by failing to say thank you with either a word or a hug.

One of the great gifts God gave us is the ability to recognize the generous gifts of others and thank both God and the giver.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** Here we are back to thanks again! It's not surprising, since thanks to God is, or should be, part of our very life's breath, as Michael pointed out at the picnic. What's the last thing you thanked God for?
- 2.** In *The Sound of Music*, Maria sings the song “My Favorite Things” and lists a host of items in nature and life for which she is thankful. What are a few of your everyday favorite things, things for which you are thankful?
- 3.** The author says that hugs are a good way of saying thanks to children. What other ways might we show children how special they are to us?
- 4.** “All Things Bright and Beautiful” from the musical *Godspell* is another song that encourages thanks to God for all God's gifts. What other songs or hymns point you toward thankfulness to God?

Who Comes First?

“In the beginning was the Word. . . .” (John 1:1)

Our neighbor’s little girl spent Thursdays with us for a number of years until she was old enough for school. At lunch each day we’d give thanks and of course finish with “Amen.” We pronounced it Ah-men. Katie would start to giggle and say, “No, no, Gramma Barb. It’s A-men.”

One day I asked her how come our “Ah-men” wouldn’t do. “You don’t understand, Gramma Barb. We say ‘A-men’ at our church because A is the first letter, and Jesus comes first, too.”

Thank you, Katie, for reminding me that Jesus comes first in my life—if my life is to have meaning, value, joy. How often I find myself relegating Jesus to the back burner. I’m rushed, and there isn’t time for morning devotions. I’m weary, and I fall asleep before I’ve taken time to thank God for the events and gifts of my day.

It’s strange, but when I’m in trouble or angry or sad, prayer is the first thing on my mind. I know that God’s guidance is necessary if I’m going to get through the day, handle the problem, find the joy again. Yet when everything is going just great, I don’t always take time to share the pleasure with God. To say thank you. To say I love you.

Thank you, Katie, for showing me what’s really important.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** “In the beginning was the Word.” How clear this verse from the Gospel of John is! It’s foundational—the first words out of John’s mouth. So we know it must be important. Katie’s way of saying it is foundational, too—and practical! The next time you say “A-men,” pronounce it Katie’s way, and think of her A-1 way of remembering that “Jesus is first” in our lives.
- 2.** As you go about your life today, ask Jesus to be your guide and companion.
- 3.** How do we as church members, and as participants in Women of the ELCA, reveal that Jesus is first in our lives?
- 4.** How do we hear God, and Jesus, calling to us?

A Time to Weep

“[There is] a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. . . .” (Ecclesiastes 3:4)

Michael's favorite stuffed dog had already been relegated to the top of the closet for years when his brother died. Several nights later we went in to tuck the covers around him before we retired. There cuddled in his arms was "Dowg." In the morning when I called to him to get up, "Dowg" was nowhere in sight.

This went on for months. His mind told him that at 11 he was too old for stuffed toys, but his hurting heart needed the comfort of that old, ratty stuffed animal. The day he was ready to put grief behind him the dog returned permanently to the closet shelf.

I've often heard the comment made about a grieving friend, "It's time she got over all that mourning. After all Harry (or whoever) has been dead for months now."

Every time I hear words like that I think about Michael and "Dowg." Only the grieving heart knows when it is the right time to put the sorrow aside. If we try to hurry either our friends or ourselves through the process, the grieving won't be complete, and the hurt won't heal.

Jesus told us to pray that we will have the strength to handle whatever comes to us. Praying for our grieving friends is the best encouragement we can give them.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** Has a child ever helped you grieve? Reflect on that experience.
- 2.** Praying for grieving friends is something we all can do. Some people even have a little booklet in which they write names of friends to pray for, and their situations—it helps them remember as they pray. Might something like that work for you?
- 3.** When you were growing up, did you have a special stuffed animal or toy that brought you solace?
- 4.** As an adult, do you have such an object?
- 5.** At your next circle meeting talk about what items in your life help bring you solace—and thank God for them. Better yet, plan a "solace show-and-tell" and ask each woman to bring an item to the meeting and to be prepared to share her story.

Just Like Me!

“To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in season, how good it is!” (Proverbs 15:23)

“Mom, mom! Guess what! My teacher said that Jesus was adopted just like me!” Karen’s little face was alight with happiness as she ran up to me in the church parking lot.

“What did your teacher say, honey?”

“She said Joseph wasn’t Jesus’ real daddy, God was. That Joseph was like my daddy. A love daddy, not a born daddy. So see, Jesus was adopted just like me.”

I don’t remember what the Sunday school lesson was about that day, but I’ll never forget the message our daughter received. Her teacher had just the right words to bring total bliss to a little girl’s heart.

It’s really scary when I think of how many times I’ve had the opportunity to say just the right word and either haven’t taken it or even noticed that it needed to be said. I’ve often rerun conversations in my mind and mentally kicked myself for a golden opportunity lost. Twenty-twenty hindsight is a marvelous thing!

Thank goodness God sent his Son, not a fallible human, to give us the right words in the right way, or we’d never have gotten the message: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”—the way for us all to be God’s adopted children.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** Can you recall a time when a Sunday school teacher’s words taught you something special? Think about the experience, and thank God for that teacher.
- 2.** If you have taught Sunday school, can you recall an experience where a student taught you something special? Pause and thank God for that student.
- 3.** “God setteth the solitary in families,” Psalm 68:6 (King James Version) tells us. And Jesus echoes that thought when he tells his disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned” (John 14:18). What other “right words” of Scripture come to mind that bring you the comfort of knowing Jesus has made you a part of his family?
- 4.** How do you help others, children included, to see that they are part of God’s family as well?
- 5.** Sometimes your presence, as well as “right words,” can pass on God’s love to others. Think of that the next time you are silent with a friend or family member or child.



A Gift of the Heart

“For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.”

(2 Corinthians 8:12)

Bonnie didn't accept babysitting jobs the year after her brother died, and so as Christmas approached, she was feeling short of funds. Yet when the big day arrived, each of us received a gift, a memorable gift from her heart.

My gift was a hand-painted recipe box. It was lovely, but when I opened it, I found the real gift inside. She had spent hours and hours transferring all my recipes from food-spattered, dog-eared scraps of paper to neatly printed, pristine cards. What a labor of love!

I've been given many gifts over the years, including sometimes expensive, beautiful ones. And Bonnie has given me many other lovely things. But if asked what gift stands out above all the rest, I instantly think of the box of recipes. I think, too, of the anticipation and apprehension on her face as she waited to see how her gift would be received.

A gift from the heart deserves only the most enthusiastic of responses. The kind of response that I think God gives us when we awkwardly do a small service for him. Sometimes I'm apprehensive about doing something new for God until I remember that God is thankful that I'm willing to try. And God appreciates the gift. After all, who knows better what giving is all about?

Beyond the Door

- 1.** Each of us no doubt has a treasured gift like the one the author describes. What is yours? Think about the occasion for the gift. Talk with a friend about it.
- 2.** Have you ever given a special gift that you just couldn't wait for the person to open? What were the circumstances of the giving and receiving? Is it fun to think about it even now?
- 3.** Do you agree that “it's better to give than to receive”? Are there times when it's better to receive than to give? Reflect on both occasions.
- 4.** In “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” (hymn 551 in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*), we praise God in the words “Thou art giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blest.” Giving, it seems, is never far from “forgiving.” Or from “blessing” and “being blest.” How wonderful that it's all part of the same package!

Time-out

“One who is quick-tempered acts foolishly. . . .” (Proverbs 14:17)

Greg was unhappy about something and was letting the family know about it, loud and long. Finally, with all the wisdom of a three-year-old, Ashlie said, “Daddy, you need a time-out.”

Greg recognized the wisdom of the suggestion and walked out to the garage for some quiet time . . . or maybe to prevent an explosion.

Since that day, I’ve often thought of that little scene. Greg isn’t the only one who speaks before thinking. Countless times I’ve been in situations, or observed situations, where a few moments spent alone to simmer down could have prevented a disaster of major proportions. It’s so easy to shoot from the lip.

In this day and age of frequent divorce, innumerable lawsuits, gang wars, international disputes, and terror, I wonder how many of those conflicts could have been defused if the combative parties had each taken a time-out? I’m sure it would have saved a few tears in my own life and saved me many an apology.

I wonder, too, if as she grows up, Ashlie will remember the wise advice she gave her dad and follow it herself. I can only pray that she will. At least I’m sure that when she has children of her own, the time-out formula will be the family rule.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** “Shooting from the lip.” Ah, what an apt phrase to describe those times when we “talk first, think later.” We’ve all done that. Recall a time (just to yourself, if you wish) when you may have “shot from the lip.”
- 2.** Recall a time when you were “the shot-ee.” Thank goodness there is forgiveness . . . for all situations.
- 3.** Do you or your family have any rules like “Count to 10 first,” “Time-out,” “Use your inside voice,” that could help you and others “think first, talk later”?
- 4.** Was there a time in your family, or among your friends, where a child helped “save the day,” as Ashlie did above? Think about it and smile!

Being a Real Person

“A gracious woman gets honor. . . .” (Proverbs 11:16)

We often met a delightful friend at the pathologist’s office when Jimmy went for his three-times-a-week blood tests. Neither she nor Jimmy could mix with the general public because of their extremely low white-blood-cell counts.

Alberta had traveled all over the world and had a home full of treasures she had collected. Sometimes she invited us home with her for cookies, milk, and a little sociability. Jimmy loved to go. Alberta answered his questions about elephant tusks, spears, and Japanese gongs with infinite patience and a storyteller’s expertise.

One day when we left her home, Jimmy said to me, “Mumma, I really like Mrs. Kerns. She talks to me like I’m a real person.”

What a gift Alberta had given him. Instead of talking over his head, as most of the medical personnel did, she spoke right to him. She listened to what he said and responded to his questions on his level. She made him feel important.

What an easy way to make a child or someone else feel of value! Whenever I’m tempted to ignore a child who is clamoring for my attention, I think of Jimmy’s pleasure at being recognized as a “real person.” It’s a gift of graciousness and simple caring that I just have to pass along.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** Who has made you feel like a “real person” in their listening to you?
- 2.** Taking time to listen to a child must be especially pleasing to Jesus, who welcomes all the little children who come to him (Matthew 19:14). Think of Jesus’ attitude the next time a child seeks to claim your attention. What an opportunity!
- 3.** Children who come to your door selling items for their school present a good opportunity to listen well. Engage them in a conversation about what they’re selling and why; ask them about their school.
- 4.** “Listen, God is calling” is also wonderful advice to us daily. When in the last few days have you heard God calling to you? How was your listening?

The Teacher

“. . . one person sharpens the wits of another. . . .” (Proverbs 27:17)

Sandra overheard her two young daughters, seven and five, discussing her pregnancy. Kelsey, the younger one, was quite concerned about how the baby got out of her mother’s tummy when it was ready to be born.

“You don’t know nothin’,” Cammie said, shaking her head. “That’s what a belly button is for. They just undo it and pull the baby out.”

“How come I can’t undo mine?”

“‘Cause you have to wait until you’re all growed up and God puts a baby in there. He wouldn’t put it in there if there wasn’t a way to get it out.”

“Cammie, do you think God knows even more than Mom?”

When Sandy told me this story, we laughed until the tears came. It’s a wonderful story, and Kelsey knew a fact that too often we adults ignore. God does know more than we do. We get so hung up with planning and worrying, and we forget to leave the problems in God’s hands.

A God who can figure out a way for a baby to be born can also show us the way out of our troubles. We just have to accept the fact that God knows more than we do.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** It’s so tough sometimes to “Let go and let God.” Can you recall a time in your life when you did, finally, “leave things to God”? How did you feel?
- 2.** It’s not a far step from Cammie’s “God wouldn’t put a baby in there if there wasn’t a way to get it out” to the truth that God never leaves us in trouble without providing a way out. Numerous hymns and Bible verses remind us of that truth. Which ones come to your mind?
- 3.** Someone has said, “God stays up all night anyway; so when you go to bed, just give your problems to God—and go to sleep.” What’s one problem in your life right now that you’d like to give over to God? Just do it.
- 4.** Listen—could it be that God is calling you to remind you that you are the creature and God is the Creator? Check out “Listen, God Is Calling” (hymn 712 in *With One Voice*) to see what three things God wants us to have. What a God!

The Boss of the Boss

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” (Matthew 28:18)

Just before we left our grandchildren in West Virginia, we gave each of them a pump water cannon. The day after we arrived back in California, our six-year-old granddaughter called us on the phone.

“Gramma, will you tell Mom that I can play with my water cannon?”

“I don’t know, Alicia. Why did she say you couldn’t?”

“She said it’s too chilly today.”

“Well, if your mother said no, I can’t help you.”

“Why not, Gramma? You’re her mom. She has to do what you tell her to do.”

Alicia had already learned that each of us must bow to a higher authority. Unfortunately, this higher authority agreed with her mom!

Most of us as we go through life have times when we want to appeal to a higher authority—to reverse decisions that have gone against us. Frequently we, too, don’t agree with an answer that God gives us.

Alicia’s mom loved her enough to take good care of her and prevent her from getting wet and chilled. Just so, God loves us enough to say “no” to those things that ultimately would be bad for us. Bowing gracefully to God’s authority is one of the hardest lessons I’ve had to learn. It’s never easy, is it? But it’s never too late to start bowing to a gracious Lord.

Beyond the Door

1. How interestingly a child’s mind works. Of course, the mother of a mother would be a higher authority! How interestingly the child’s (and adult’s!) mind works—assuming that the higher authority would always agree with us! How good that God knows what is best for us, regardless of our often misplaced desires. When, in your life, did God have a “better idea” for you than you did for yourself?
2. What can you do to seek to know God’s will for your life more fully? God is forever calling to us to listen. When we do listen, we should be prepared to be “surprised by God,” the same way that author C. S. Lewis was “surprised by joy,” when God came into his life and Lewis recognized it.
3. When has God already surprised you in your life?
4. The author is right: it is never too late to give praise, and ourselves, to a gracious God. Check out Romans 12:1–2 to see what our “spiritual worship” toward God is, so that we can “discern what is the will of God.”

A Little Child Shall Lead Us

“Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me. . . .” (Matthew 19:14)

Jimmy was dying. In his usual way he had to tease, have his little joke. Then he put up his arms for me to give him his hug on both sides and a kiss in the middle. After that he gave a soft sigh, closed his eyes, and went to sleep. Early the next morning, without ever waking again, he joined his Jesus for eternity.

We were devastated. Yet, at the same time, we were relieved and grateful that his suffering was over. In a strange way we were proud of him. He had fought so hard to live without giving in to self-pity or cranky whining. Not that he was an angel; he was most decidedly a normal boy, good at times, ornery at others. It was just that he took whatever came to him and found some way to make a joke of it.

I think that his example was one of the most important lessons I learned from my children. First of all, to trust Jesus—“because he loves us, Mumma.” Second, to take whatever comes my way and regardless of what it is, find a way to laugh and be happy. And last, but by no means least, to share love generously.

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me.” Jimmy went, confident that his Jesus was waiting with open arms to share a joke and a hug with him.

Beyond the Door

1. What a special relationship Jesus must have with children! Read Matthew 18:1–5 and 19:13–15 for a marvelous description of that relationship.
2. So often children can see the joy in even a tough situation, as Jimmy does here. Has a child ever shared an insight with you that “went way beyond his years”? Have you ever thought of writing a brief meditation on that, as the author has done here—just for your own, or your family’s, personal use? Think about it.
3. Also, check out the books *Jesus, This Is Your Life* and *Noah, Build Your Boat* (edited by Jeff Kunkel, and available from Augsburg Fortress, Publishers). Both are marvelous, ingenuous examples of writing and pictures by youngsters as they retell stories in Jesus’ life and from the Old Testament. A little child is leading us all here.
4. Why not borrow Jeff Kunkel’s idea and have a child, or children, in your life (or Sunday school class) retell or draw biblical stories?

Happy Birthday, Dear Jesus, Happy Birthday to You!

**“to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
who is the Messiah.” (Luke 2:11)**

We were all gathered around the breakfast table to have our Christmas feast of stollen bread and sausage before we went to church. Mike, who was four, leaned on one elbow and looked at me with a puzzled frown. “Mom, if it’s Jesus’ birthday, how come we get presents and he doesn’t?”

I tried to explain that when we gave at church, we gave Jesus our love and the offerings, but Mike was still dubious.

“We always get a birthday cake, Mom. Couldn’t we at least have a birthday cake for Jesus?”

So that is how we came to have candles on the Christmas stollen from then on—at least until the children became big enough to think it might be “dumb.”

I don’t think a Christmas has come in the many years since that morning that I haven’t thought about Mike’s question: “If it’s Jesus’ birthday, how come we get presents and he doesn’t?” He put his finger right on the problem of how we celebrate the Savior’s birth.

Jesus did all the giving—and still does. I told Mike we gave him our love. Yet too often he gets only a small fraction of it. Why? I don’t know. I do know that the more love I give him and others, the more I have left over. And since our love is an expression of God’s love, there is always enough to go around.

(continued)

*“Mom, if it’s Jesus’ birthday, how come we
get presents and he doesn’t?”*

Beyond the Door

- 1.** We're never too old to sing "Happy birthday, dear Jesus!" How about planning for a birthday cake with candles as a part of your next Christmas celebration—even if (maybe especially if?) there are no children in the house? Perhaps it can help remind you of your childlike faith, the kind Jesus found so endearing in Matthew 18 (see verse 3).
- 2.** Ways abound to celebrate Christmas more simply. Secure the booklet (updated annually) "Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?" available from Alternatives for Simple Living, P.O. Box 2787, Sioux City, Iowa 51106, or call 1-800-821-6153, or check out their Web site: www.simpleliving.org
- 3.** Women of the ELCA supports a number of ministries for which you could consider a special gift—at Christmastime, Thankoffering time, or any time as a way of giving a present to Jesus. Call 800-638-3522, ext. 2737, to learn more about these opportunities.
- 4.** Women of the ELCA has a scholarship program for women who are taking a new direction in their lives. Contact Women of the ELCA, Scholarship Program Director, for information on how you can contribute and help change a life.
- 5.** The author says that there's always enough of God's love to go around. What examples in your life, or the lives of others, prove the truth of that statement?

She Can See God Better

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (Matthew 5:8)

Katy was enamored of our new woman pastor. She had blonde hair and looked “just like Barbie”—at least to Katy. After church one Sunday, the pastor was greeting members and guests, and she pushed her sunglasses onto the top of her head.

“Mom!” Katy exclaimed, “Look at Pastor! I’ll bet she can really see God better now.”

We all laughed, but I wonder how many of us wished that we had special glasses so we could see God better? Sometimes when I get overrun with problems, either my own or someone else’s, I would like to see God face to face. I’d like to know what God wants me to do, what God wants me to say. I’d like to know if God’s face would show approval, amazement, or disappointment at what I’m doing.

Would God look at me and sigh? Or be proud that I had finally gotten the right idea? Would God nudge Jesus and say, “Oh, no! There she goes again.”

Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” (John 14:9).

Maybe Katy has the right idea: all we need is “Son” glasses to see God better.

Beyond the Door

- 1.** South African bishop Desmond Tutu has said that if you wish to see God, look at the person next to you. Who in your life has shown you God?
- 2.** What child has shown you God’s love and in what circumstances? Thank God for the child, and the experience.
- 3.** Our Christian faith tells us that Jesus is the clearest example of God’s love. Children catch this truth more than anyone. They have unusual “Son” glasses. What things help us to get “Son” glasses, do you think?
- 4.** God isn’t only like a father to us, but like a nurturing mother, too, as many images in Scripture remind us. Who are some women in your life who have shown you the caring, nurturing nature of God? If they are still living, send a note of thanks to them. If they are part of the church triumphant, then take time to think of them in your prayers, and thank God for them, as well.

Being a Big Girl Is Hard

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you. . . .”

(Matthew 7:12)

Bonnie stood in front of me, tears streaming down her sad little face. In a voice of abject misery she said, “Mumma, when I was a little girl and something bad happened to me, you’d lovey me till I felt happy again. How come now that I’m getting to be a big girl I have to get happy all by myself?”

Instantly my arms went around her as she nestled close and dampened my sweater with her tears. I felt tears prick my own eyelids. My “big girl” was only seven years old. I realized that I had been expecting too much of her because she was the oldest child.

It is so easy to hustle our children out of their happy early childhood. It is simpler for us if they become independent, especially if there are younger children needing care. But “Big girls don’t cry” is neither a true nor a realistic statement.

Actually the age doesn’t matter, does it? At any age, 7 or 70, a hug can help dry the tears. Simple caring heals wounds for both the child and the hurting adult. The added bonus is that it blesses the hugger as well as the “hug-ee.”

Beyond the Door

- 1.** What ways do you have in your family for “drying the tears”?
- 2.** What ways for “drying the tears” did you have in the family in which you grew up?
- 3.** Maybe the bumper sticker that reads “Have you hugged your child today?” is good “bumper-sticker theology,” after all?
- 4.** If you were making a bumper sticker for yourself, what phrase would you use to say that your child (or grandchild, or any special child in your life) is important to you? To God?

Zzzzz Zzzzz!

I'm Glad You Happened to Me

“. . . love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

I opened one eye and looked at the clock. The next moment I leapt from the bed and yelled to Karen, “Get up, fast. I overslept and you’ll be late to class. Move it!”

She in turn jumped from her bed, tripped over her blanket, and stubbed her toe on the bed frame. Jumping around on one foot as she hollered, she banged into the dresser and hit her crazy bone. In tears, she wailed, “Why does everything happen to me?”

I tried to soothe and hurry her at the same time. Fifteen frantic minutes later we were in the car. I handed her a granola bar and a cup of juice, gave her hair a quick brushing, and started the engine. We pulled into the school driveway just as the bell rang, and Karen leaned over and gave me a hug. “Mom, I’m glad you happened to me, too.”

What a surprise gift, after such a morning! None of us can prevent the daily traumas of life, but when our families, our neighbors, and our friends go through them, the best gift we can give them is our caring. Beyond caring, let us give practical, loving assistance. In that way they, also, will be glad we happened to them.



Beyond the Door

- 1.** To whom would you like to say today, “I’m glad you happened to me”? Just do it.
- 2.** Is there someone in your life right now who needs that “practical assistance” the author speaks of? Try giving such practical assistance when the appropriate time comes. Or make the appropriate time.
- 3.** Our Creator is forever showing and telling us how thankful God is that “we happened to God.” Think about it. What is the latest sign from God that you are loved?
- 4.** Have you ever been stopped in your tracks by a “surprise gift” from a child and could only give thanks? How blessed you are!

Goodbyes Are a Circle of Love

“Grace be with you.” (Colossians 4:18)

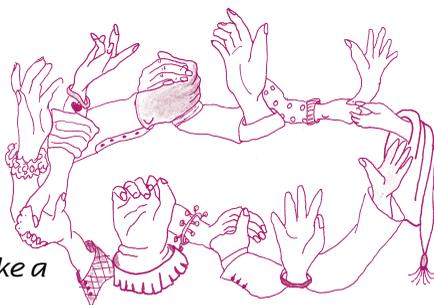
It was time to leave our grandchildren and return home. “Goodbye, honey, I love you.”

“Gramma, why is it goodbye? It isn’t good if you’re going home.”

“Actually, Alicia, it means “God be with you.” When we go home, we ask God to take care of you.”

“But if he’s taking care of us, who is taking care of you?”

Wow! Theology for a six-year-old when the clock is ticking! “God is here in West Virginia with you,” I offered, “and out in California with Granddaddy and me. God can hold both your hand and mine, sort of like a big circle.”



“Hey, Gramma! That’s God’s ring-around-the-rosy.”

“You’re right, honey. Every time you play it with your friends, you can remember God’s playing it with you and Ashlie and Gramma and Granddaddy, too.”

“Goodbye” has never been an empty phrase to me since. The word said joins me and the one I’m speaking to—and all the rest of the world—in God’s ring-around-the-rosy. May God’s grace be with us all.

Beyond the Door

1. This meditation sounds a little like the children’s song, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” with all its various stanzas. Review some of the song’s stanzas in your head silently.
2. Then make up one or more stanzas of your own, putting your own person or creature in place of “the whole world”—like “God’s got Great-Aunt Phoebe in his hands.”
3. Try this at your next circle meeting to reveal all who are in your group’s “circle of love.”
4. Include animals and all God’s creatures in some stanzas.
5. Listen for God calling you to become more aware of how big God’s world is, and how widespread God’s love is for everyone in it.

Out of the mouths of babes



Devotions inspired by the insights of children



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