

**Blessed by Being—Mark 1: 1-11**  
*(January 7, 2023-Baptism of Jesus)*

*“What defines me is not what I do but what I receive. Out of a deep spiritual yearning, I have received sobriety, recovery, and a working relationship with a god of my understanding—so that I have received grace. Out of that same yearning, I have received community, belonging, home and the opportunity to be productive—so that I have received prosperity. Spiritual yearning has brought me friends, fellowship, brotherhood, family and a life partner who expands me—so that I have received love. That same yearning has brought me calm, peace, prayer, compassion and forgiveness—so that I have received joy and freedom. What defines me is not what I do but what I receive, and I have received in great measure.”*

Richard Wagamese

What did you get for Christmas, anything good? Receiving a thoughtful gift is one of the most heartwarming things about Christmas. As the late Richard Wagamese states, it's not a bad approach to life either, to look at life as a recipient of gifts, to be defined not by what we do, but by what we receive. I wonder what difference it might make in our lives, our families, our economics, our politics to live from this place of blessing?

I'm reminded of a conversation just this past week with Andrea, my wife. We're in a reflective mood, having spent time with our three adult children, all in their twenties. We're talking about the surprises, the people they've become that we didn't see coming. We talk about the signs we missed, glossed over, or tried to suppress for their "own good." Suddenly, I feel a welling up behind my eyes, I begin to speak but the words are caught in my throat. Eventually I share that if I could go back and change one thing about my parenting it would be to pay more attention to who they are telling me they are instead of anxiously trying to make them well-adjusted to the expectations of their parents, their families, and their societies. To put it in terms of today's theme I would define my parenting less as something I do and more as something I receive. Or to put it another way, I would allow what I do as a parent to flow from what I receive. I would pay more attention to who my children are telling me they are and allow that to inform what I do as a parent. I think I might be learning that lesson. I've shared that my middle child, Juniper is trans, in the process of transitioning from male to female. It's been quite an education as gradually June shares and I receive the fullness of her life. Last month as the calendar turns from November to December and I think about June coming home for Christmas I start noticing the pictures on the walls of our homes of June as a boy and a young man with their previous name. I wonder if this bothers her. I forget about this, as I'm wont to do, I only remember as I'm driving June home on Christmas Eve. I share with them my wondering and she replies that no, it doesn't bother her at all, then thanks me for noticing and asking. "What defines me is not what I do, but what I receive, and I have received in great measure", says Richard Wagamese.

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<sup>1</sup> "Embers: One Ojibwe's Meditations", Douglas and McIntyre, Madeira Park B.C., 2016, pg. 155.

Palestine has been on my mind so much, I'm so desperate for hope. This week I read about the Parent's Circle, a group of Israeli and Palestinian parents who've lost children in the decades long conflict, and who see reconciliation as a pre-requisite to achieving a sustainable peace. I read about Rami Elhanan, an Israeli whose 14-year-old daughter is killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber in the late nineties. Mr. Elhanan says, "after Shiva (the 7 days of Jewish mourning), when everyone leaves you wonder what's next?" "When someone murders your 14-year-old little daughter, the one and only thing you have in your head is unlimited anger and an urge for revenge that is stronger than death." One day, a man whom he doesn't really know but remembers as a visitor during Shiva, arrives at his house, tells Mr. Elhanan how he lost his son to a Hamas fighter and wants to invite Mr. Elhanan to a meeting of parents, Palestinians and Israeli's who've lost their children to the violence but nevertheless want peace. Mr. Elhanan instantly becomes enraged and asks, "How dare you enter the home of people who have just lost a child and talk to them about Peace?" But the man is not offended and with great calm and patience extends the invitation once again. Partly out of curiosity, partly out of not wanting to offend the man Mr. Elhanan agrees to attend.

He describes the day, his aloofness as he sees fellow Jews getting off buses chartered to bring families to the venue. Then he says, "...I saw an amazing spectacle! Something that was completely new to me. I saw Arabs getting off the buses, bereaved Palestinian families: men, women, and children, coming towards me, greeting me for peace, hugging me and crying with me...I am not religious – quite the opposite – and so I am at a loss to explain the change I underwent at that moment. But one thing became as clear to me as the sun in the noon sky: from that day on I got a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Since that day, I have dedicated my life to one thing only: to...shout in a loud voice...this is not our destiny! Nowhere is it written that we must continue dying and sacrificing our children forever and ever in this difficult horrible holy land." Mr. Elhanan goes on to relate that more recently, but before the current escalation, after a terrible bloody day, members of the Parent's Circle, both Israeli and Palestinian, decide to donate blood to the victims. Israeli parents donate to Palestinian victims; Palestinian parents donate to Israeli victims. On the same evening, whilst in the studio of Israeli television, an interviewer asks, in a voice both wondrous and shocked: How could you donate blood to the enemy?! Mr. Elhanan replies, "...it is far less painful to donate blood to the needy than to spill it unnecessarily." What grace, what beauty can enter our lives when we stop ourselves from doing, from acting out of fear, anxiety and anger and wait to receive what God has to offer us and allow those gifts to define who we are and what we do.<sup>2</sup>

It made all the difference in Jesus' ministry. The author of Mark sees the beginning of the story of Jesus not at birth (the Christmas pageant will never be based on Mark's gospel), but at the moment when Jesus grounds himself in an identity that will allow him to do God's work. Jesus needs an identity that will not fail him, an identity that will sustain him throughout, an identity that will allow him to forsake a life of social acceptance and

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<sup>2</sup> Rami Elhanan, "Replacing Pain with Hope", [https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/stories/rami-elhanan\\_eng/](https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/stories/rami-elhanan_eng/)

security in order to do God's work in the world. An identity that isn't dependent on the approval of others or the aspirations of the ego. Jesus is not blessed for his accomplishments, he has not done a thing yet in Mark's gospel: no miracles, no healings, no teachings, nothing. He is blessed for claiming the truth of who he is—a beloved child of God. This is the key; this is the core. This is what allows Jesus to do what he does, to live a life of unflinching commitment to love. It all flows from this received blessing.

The grace in Jesus' ministry and in our lives is a bit of a paradox, the moment we stop putting what we do, our accomplishments, at the forefront of how we define ourselves and instead allow ourselves to be defined by this received blessing that we and all people are children of God and live our lives from this sacred place, our actions and accomplishments actually take on more significance. Seemingly inconsequential acts, like noticing a picture on a wall, telling parables, attending a funeral, washing the feet of a friend, talking in a circle, stopping the business of adults to notice and centre a child, or donating blood, become imbued with profound importance, because each one reveals the love of God to another human being and their true identity as a child of God. What greater accomplishment could there be? The Holy One calls out to us in this post-Christmas time, embrace this blessing, this gift, let your hearts be warmed by this grace and know that you, you, you, you are beloved children, in whom God is well pleased. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Joe Gaspar