

“Giving Is All We Have to Give”

The poem with which we opened this Thanksgiving Day service is by Alberto Rios. Born in 1952, he is the inaugural state poet laureate of Arizona and the author of many poetry collections, including *A Small Story about the Sky* (Copper Canyon Press, 2015). In 1981, he received the Walt Whitman Award for his collection *Whispering to Fool the Wind* (Sheep Meadow Press, 1982). He served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 2014 to 2020.¹

He says about this poem, “This is a poem of thanks to those who live lives of service, which, I think, includes all of us—from the large measure to the smallest gesture, from caregiving to volunteerism to being an audience member or a reader. I have been able to offer these words to many groups, not only as a poem but also as a recognition. We give for so many reasons, and are bettered by it.”²

I was drawn to this poem by how he juxtaposes positives and negatives in explaining the act of giving. In the first two lines he says that we give because someone gave to us, and because we were not given to. How important it is to recognize when we have received gifts, small or large, and then pass the gifts along. It is quite easy to think we accomplished everything on our own when in reality parents, teachers, friends, mentors, and so many others have had a hand in our successes. It is just as important to recognize that while we may not have received the needed gifts that is not a reason to withhold from giving to others. The giving has to start somewhere and it might as well be with us.

Giving to others can also change us for the better or the worse. We can be gratified by our giving. We can receive thanks or gifts in return for our giving. We can also be injured for giving gifts that are rejected, for gifts that go unrecognized, and for gifts that hurt us to give. Like most things in life, we give over and over again knowing that our gifts can be rejected, overlooked, and costly to ourselves. We give knowing that there may be no thanksgiving on the horizon.

Rios goes on to point out that there are many kinds of gifts. They can be “loud and quiet,/Big, though small.” Our gift can be a simple word of thanks, opening a door, listening to someone who is hurting, or helping someone who has dropped a package. Our gifts can be grand such as funding a nonprofit, helping someone struggling financially, clearing a overgrown vacant lot, or going on a mission trip overseas. Small or large they are all meaningful.

I noticed how he imagines giving as always “hand to hand.” When I hear the phrase hand to hand, I think of combat. That is how fraught the phrase is. There is no guarantee that our gifts will be received with an open hand. It could just as easily be rejected with a closed fist. It can be accepted and discarded thoughtlessly.

Yellow and blue, two of my favorite colors when shared become green. Not a special green just “simple green.” The color of nature, the color of life, and the color of growth. Green is also the simple color of Ordinary Time in the church year.

He concludes saying, “You gave me/What you did not have, and I gave you/What I had to give—together, we made/Something greater from the difference.” On that Thanksgiving Day in 1621, the settlers in Plymouth shared with each other

¹ Quoted from Poets.org <https://poets.org/poem/when-giving-all-we-have> . Accessed November 28, 2024.

² Ibid

what they had harvested. Later the American Indians shared with the colonists the food they had, and the colonists shared in return. They shared what they had to give and together they made “Something greater from the difference.”

In a world where all too often we hear the complaint “you are taking something away from me,” the poet points out that when we share our gifts we are not the poorer for it, rather there is more to go around. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”³ Quality of life is not limited to the stuff we have gathered and hoarded in homes which become warehouses. The good life is a life where what we have is shared, and not just our stuff, but most especially our love.

As Paul wrote, without love we are nothing but a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”⁴ It is love of our neighbor and even our enemy that makes life rich. Love makes a heart that wants to give. Love also makes a life that can give thanks to God and one another.

This Thanksgiving Day let us give thanks for all that we have received. This Thanksgiving Day let us also give to each other because giving is all we have to give.

³ John 10:10 NRSVUE

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:1b