

# A Gift to the World: Seeking Not Our Own

A teacher who was also a poet once explained to me the meaning of a “found poem.” It’s a poem that takes its words and lines from sources outside the poet: newspaper headlines, advertisements, the outdoor message boards found in front of churches, an overheard conversation, even graffiti.

Just this morning, I came across a found poem—as well as some “found advice” from the Old Book.

I had parked my car and was walking up Main Street to a favorite coffee shop of mine when I passed Inklings, a gift store selling special notebooks and pens, apparel and accessories for women, and a multitude of small gifts. On the sidewalk outside the store, written in marker on a signboard, were these words:

*Aren't Sure  
What Gift to Give?  
Your Answer  
Is Inside.*

As I had intended writing about the “found advice” I’d stumbled across earlier, this message was one of those acts of serendipity sometimes kindly tossed my way. Here was a perfect piece of found poetry that surely had me in mind as its bullseye. The shop owner, of course, wrote those words hoping to entice customers into her store, but given my mood, they struck me as a question and answer with profound metaphysical meaning, opening up all sorts of possibilities for discussion and debate.

The “found advice” came from a church bulletin I’d picked up at a Melkite Church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where my daughter and her family are now congregants. In that bulletin

was an essay, written, I'm guessing, by the priest, part of which addressed divisions within our culture and in Christianity.

The article cites several general ways that churches, both Protestant and Catholic, so often find themselves split over everything ranging from faith issues to the intrusions of secular politics. Near the end, the writer urges readers to remember that "mutual love is the prerequisite for the Liturgy and for all our activity as Church." The author then quotes some selections from Scripture that should perhaps give all of us pause, regardless of our beliefs. Here is a sample:

*Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. (Romans 14:19).*

*Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification. (Romans 15:2)*

*Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. (1 Corinthians 10:24)*

*Let all that you do be done in love. (1 Corinthians 16:14)*

These words hit hard, especially considering the bitter divisions in our country, our culture wars, and the upcoming elections. In the headlines and articles I read every day, I see few who seem to seek "the other's well-being," who do all they can "in love," or who "please [their] neighbor for his good." Heaven knows I have no place in that golden company.

Which puts me and, I suspect, most other Americans in a dilemma. How do we please our neighbors for their good if they seem intent on destroying all that we believe? How do we seek the well-being of men and women who seem to despise all that we are and stand for?

Here I can offer only a partial solution to this predicament.

If we love our country, for example, we can defend its values to our last breath without demonizing our opponents. Instead of making villains of those opponents, we fight tooth and nail against their ideology. We edify them when possible, we vote them from office, we resist them on every front, but we do so recognizing their humanity.

“Unless a man becomes the enemy of an evil,” G. K. Chesterton is reputed to have said, “he will not even become its slave but rather its champion.” We can recognize and refute an evil without vilifying those who participate in that evil, many of whom do so blindly or even with good intentions.

The ability to make that distinction—and here I am addressing myself as much as to anyone reading these words—may just be one of the best gifts we can give to others.

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