

Best gift: What God wants us to have

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

The best gift I ever received was something I never wanted. A few days before I finished my 12th and final year as pastor of a church I loved deeply, the congregation's lay leader shuffled into my office. Nobody had bothered to vote James Alexander in as lay leader; he just *was* the leader of the laity, the godfather of a sprawling church family united largely by their love for this giant of a man. James was 89, but he seemed as if he had centuries on him. Wise, solid, very southern, with a gravelly voice and surprisingly undiminished physical vigor, he wore overalls in a pretty dressy community.

Those of us who knew James were awestruck by this man's holiness—it was not that smug, sanitized kind of holiness, but an earthy, calloused, believable holiness. He visited church members more than the clergy did, called in advance to ask permission on the rare occasions when he had to miss worship, and hugged all the children. He still drove a tractor, and he had lived with his hands in God's good earth to the point that he was one with creation.

"I couldn't decide what to give you, now that you're leaving," James said to me. "I bought a nice leather Bible for your family." Coming from anybody else this would have seemed corny, but I sensed he wasn't done. He reached deep into his denim pocket, pulled out something and gradually opened his crusty hand. It was his pocketknife, worn from decades of going everywhere with him, indispensable for a country gentleman who wanted to be prepared when a rope or apple or container needed to be cut.

I've reflected on the profound marvel of his gift. If someone asked me, "James, list 500 things you might vaguely hope to possess one day," I (a city slicker) would never have said, "Hey, a pocketknife is what I want." But here was this invaluable treasure being pressed into my palm.

Then James added some words. "Carry that around with you in your pocket. Then some day, when you're having a bad day, feel it down in there and remember that somebody loves you."

James had loved many pastors (well, there was one he said he merely liked), so the knife wasn't an achievement award. But somehow the lovely truth that he had loved my predecessors earmarked the gift more clearly to me as an instance of grace.

The undesiredness of the knife gave me pause. I didn't want a knife, but then I didn't *not* want a knife either. How many of my sermons when I was young were bedeviled by the notion that God satisfies our desires, that Jesus fills the yearning we have inside? Not that God doesn't satisfy our desires. But the gift God gives is something that we generally never thought of wanting, or that we'd forgotten how to want. During Holy Week, the disciples weren't queuing up for crosses.

The knife was what James wanted me to have. Ever since, I have been on a campaign against gift cards and cash for Christmas and birthdays. Why are these increasingly popular gifts appealing? "So he can get whatever he wants." Or "I don't know how to guess what she would really want." All of this feeds into the consumer mind-set that declares that life is about me getting whatever I want.

God gave us what God wanted us to have. In fact, God gave us a gift that whittles away at what I stubbornly have fawned over. A knife is a sharply symbolic gift—because it cuts. How is God's word described? As sharper than a two-edged sword? God's word, which I never really asked for, prunes and cuts away like a surgical scalpel carving out of me what would be my undoing if left unattended. James gave me a knife.

He knew that he could attach some words to the gift and that the words would carry the freight. "When you're having a bad day, feel it down in there and remember that somebody loves you." We are not always sure what to make of the stuff that comes our way. But whatever we notice out there, the shade of a tree or the grin on a face, the juiciness of an orange or the next breath I am about to take, even the crucifix hanging in the sanctuary or the sip of wine with a wafer still lingering on my palate, every good thing from God has words attached, unforgettable words that we need on the bad days, memorable words that we savor on the brightest days.

Is the gift I really *do* want underneath the stuff I get that I'm duped into thinking I want? Doesn't it take a gift like James's knife to lay all this open so we finally see that God isn't so ineffectual as to give us merely what we crave, but that instead he gives us something infinitely richer? I think I can begin to comprehend what Hans Urs von Balthasar was getting at as he prayed:

We always wanted to measure your fulfillments by the standard of our desires. More than what our hollow space contains, so we thought, we cannot obtain from you. But when your Spirit began to blow in us, we experienced so much greater space that our own standard became meaningless to us. We noticed the first installment and pledge of a wholly other freedom. . . . And thus is fulfilled the promise which is the blowing Spirit itself in person: Because he blows the fulfillment toward us. He does it infallibly, if we are ready to allow ourselves to be surpassed in our desires. The religion and desire of all peoples means ultimately this: to get beyond one's own desires.