

## The gift of enough

By [Kristin M. Swenson](#)

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Before my Great Aunt Esther died, she lived in downtown Minneapolis in poverty. Oddly, this is not embarrassing to my proper, upper-middle-class, Christian family. Esther simply continued to live as she had when her husband, my grandmother's brother Ludwig, was alive. When we describe someone as living in poverty, we usually add an adjective-grinding, devastating, dreadful, something like that. Of Aunt Esther and Uncle Lud, and at the risk of sounding cloying, I'm tempted to add "blessed."

Esther and Lud were committed to God as I have never seen in anyone else. They were Christian missionaries in Africa for decades. Whatever else you might think about that old-style missionary work, many babies with mahogany-dark skin were baptized with the names Ludwig and Esther during those decades.

I knew my great aunt and uncle as a kind, elderly couple eclipsed by the energy and drama of my extended family when we gathered for occasional Sunday dinners, Thanksgiving and Christmas. I remember Esther's remarkably soft skin when she would take my hand and say, "Now let's talk to Jesus," and I remember their gentle but determined rejection of all offers of a ride home after dinner. They preferred to take the bus so that they could visit and pray with all the people-"girls and boys," "God's children"-who rode those buses.

After Lud died, Esther continued to minister to the poor downtown, unattached to any particular organization but encouraging the homeless, the drug-addled, the alcoholics and mentally ill, quietly praying with desperate, hopeless and tired individuals in doorways and on the sidewalk. Remarkably, Aunt Esther and Uncle Lud didn't seem crazy. They knew these pitiable neighbors by name and were loved in return. Their lives were rich as they saw it, so over-flowing with the generosity of their good God that they just kept giving everything away.

A decent coat is crucial in the Minnesota winter. Before an aging Esther finally agreed to move into the nearby Lutheran retirement home, I distinctly remember a shopping trip with my Aunt Jean. The goal was to find a winter coat for Esther that was warm enough to keep her comfortable (and, frankly, alive) yet ugly enough that she couldn't give it away. We settled on a shapeless quilted number in a bronze-ish hue unflattering for any human complexion. She was terribly grateful when we dropped it off. But by the time of our next visit, she had already given it to "some poor girl who really needed something to keep her warm."

Esther lived with the certainty that she had enough. She figured this out not through calculating her savings, income and spending but through her extraordinary faith in God. I witnessed firsthand how this translated directly into her care for others. There is a wide-reaching practical effect of such faith, and it is nothing less than to participate in God's work in the world.

I'm reminded of that great exemplar of peace, of change through non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi identified seven "sins" as the root of injustices, destruction and violence: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice and politics without principle. Although as a Hindu he didn't ground his observations in the traditions and language of the Bible, they are in profound agreement with Christian faith. The faith that allows us to receive God's gift of a sense of enough not only obviates such "sins" but goes farther to ease suffering, promote peace and partner with God for good in the world.

*Additional lectionary columns by Swenson appear in the September 21 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*