



GIFT—Give It Forward Today

The Broken Way by Ann Voskamp

You are a GIFT—a gift from God to those around you. Now don't get a swelled head thinking that you are God's gift to mankind! But you are a GIFT and God can use each of you in a special way to serve one another.

About 5 years ago, I read a book by Ann Voskamp called One Thousand Gifts. It really changed the way I look at life and the way I pray.

Ann Voskamp is, as she puts it, "wife to The Farmer, mama to six, and honestly...a bit of a mess." She is a Mennonite from Ontario, Canada, where, with their 7<sup>th</sup> child recently adopted from China, she writes a blog and books about her struggles within her busy life and how God's grace is revealed in it. She struggles with depression is also an amazing photographer.

In 1000 Gifts, she described how, in searching for joy and meaning in life, she was challenged to find 1000 things she was grateful for and to make a list of them. I, too, started a list at that time, and in the process of giving thanks for 3 new and different things each day, it changed both the way I looked at life and the way I pray. There were good days and bad days. Even on the days when nothing seemed to be going the way I wanted, I had to learn to give thanks for 3 things that day in the midst of the trouble, suffering, or frustration. I was learning to give thanks in all things and all circumstances.

Did you know that *Eucharisto*, the word from which we get Eucharist or communion, means thanksgiving? Also in the root of that word is *charis* meaning grace and *chara* meaning joy. When we partake in the Eucharist or communion, we participate in grace, joy, and thanksgiving. This is the essence of our Christian life—grace, joy, and thanksgiving.

Remember, after **giving thanks**, Jesus took the bread and broke it and poured out the wine. Voskamp points out that *Eucharisto*—thanksgiving—always precedes the miracle.

The miracle in communion is of his body broken for us and his blood shed for our salvation.

In her newest book, The Broken Way, Voskamp takes the communion illustration one step further. Remember, Bob Kern asked the children last week if Jesus Christ was sitting out there in the congregation? Yes, he is in each one of you. We are Christ's body in this world. **We, too**, are broken and poured out for others. As a result, we experience the miracle of *koininia, fellowship with God and each other*. We are all broken vessels which are healed by sharing our brokenness with others.

This echoes what Henry Nouwen said in his book, Life of the Beloved. Nouwen says Christ takes us just as he did the bread, gives thanks and blesses us, breaks us, and gives us out to others to share his love and salvation with them.

One day Voskamp's young daughter wanted a paper heart taped to her chest as a reminder that God's love is always with us. When she tried to straighten it, it tore. Instead of crying as Ann expected, she said, "Maybe the love gets in easier right where the heart's broke open?" There is so much we can learn from the innocence and insights of children!

Her farmer husband also reminded her of the brokenness of life: "The seed breaks to give us the wheat. The soil breaks to give us the crop, the sky breaks to give us the rain, the wheat breaks to give us bread. And the bread breaks to give us the feast. There was even an alabaster jar that broke to give Him all the glory...Never be afraid of being a broken thing."

"The miracle happens in the breaking." Jesus gave thanks, broke, and gave the loaves and fish away *in the same way* he did with the bread of the last supper.

We may wonder why am I so broken? But the miracle in **our** individual healing and renewal comes in recognizing and remembering our brokenness, in giving thanks for our brokenness, and in giving our broken selves to others.

"For God so loved that He gave..." Is there any word more powerful than giving? Thanksgiving. Forgiving. Care-giving. Life-giving. Everything that matters in living comes down to a form of giving.

Love gives. Voskamp says that we try to do grand acts to make someone happy but don't make them as grandly happy as simply doing small acts to make that one person

feel loved. Isn't it strange how everybody wants to change the world, but nobody wants to do the small things that make a difference in just one person feeling loved?

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Diane shared one of her favorite verses from Zechariah—"Do not despise the day of small things." We each can give small acts of kindness to another person or just be a purposeful active presence with someone. In these small things, we find joy and healing ourselves. It is not always easy to do this or even be aware of the need to do this. Being a purposeful, active presence is what Stephen Ministers are trained to do. As a Stephen Minister, when I'm with a care receiver, it is easy to be present to the person. That's what I'm trained and expected to do. But what about all the other people we interact with every day—the cashier at the store, the wait staff in restaurants, the receptionist at the doctor's office, the person on the other end of that annoying phone call who is just trying to make a living? Recently, I started trying to practice awareness of the individual that was serving me, but it isn't easy because I get caught up in my own activities and self-absorption. I've never been a person to use names a lot. My husband Larry is so much better at that, but I've been trying to notice their name on a nametag and call them by it. It personalizes the interaction. I'm surprised by the eye contact and increased pleasant responses I get when I do that. It helps them feel like they are important as an individual instead of being cog of the wheel of life. These are all individuals who dream, hope, love, and struggle just like me, and I need to see and value them as such.

Bucket lists are big these days but Voskamp says that instead of filling up her bucket with all the things she's accomplished, she wants to empty her bucket. She encourages us to empty our buckets of all we have to give. That we have anything at all to give is only because Jesus first gave it to us.

It is interesting that in our human bodies, the cells that only benefit themselves are known as cancer...Cancer is what refuses to die to self. Jesus calls us to die to self in order to love and serve others. He empowers us to do that.

We may believe in Jesus; we don't always believe that he is working in us to accomplish his work and his will. You may believe in God, never forget—it's God who believed in you first.

We are each where we are today to help others where they are...caring is our calling no matter how limited we may feel. I would love to train each and every one of you as Stephen Ministers, because each of us is called by God to care for others.

Are you feeling too broken to help others? None of us are qualified on our own merits. There is that old saying that I'm sure you've heard some variation of that God doesn't chose the gifted; he gifts the chosen. You are each chosen by God to be a gift to someone else.

Do you ever know that when you're pretending to have it all together is when you are NOT the most loved? We may actually be more loved when we are feeling broken and falling apart...when we are honest and vulnerable with one another. Voskamp discovered this when trying to support a friend in her mission work. One day she shared one of her own problems with her friend and said, "Thanks for being a safe place to come with a mess of broken." Her friend replied, "You know what you just did—you just came and gave your heart. You just laid out your broken heart...this is the first time since I've know you that you've open your heart...and voluntarily shared." Voskamp goes on to comment that she was always reluctant to share any of her own brokenness because she didn't want to be a burden. Yet it was in that moment of giving her broken heart to her friend that she and her friend found full love and communion.

The first steps in the broken way may lead to your being as compassionate with yourself as Jesus is with you, granting yourself the grace He gives, grace to get it wrong and grace to try again.

As the Farmer said, "Never be afraid of being a broken thing," for when we are weak, then Jesus is strong within us.

The Rices, an African missionary couples we support here at Valley, said in their blog recently that we Americans are good fix it people. On the flip side "lies our propensity to shield ourselves from the pain of others." A missionary friend told Bob that he wanted to run away from the suffering he was witnessing, but as they studied scripture together, they "came to see that Jesus was unique in that he was able and willing to sit with people in their suffering." They came to realize that sitting with people in their suffering is a form of ministry, even when we are unable to fix them.

What does all this have to do with Stephen Ministry?

As a SM God uses my brokenness to have empathy and be a presence to the care receiver. The care receiver also allows their brokenness to be a blessing to me. Our brokenness is a mutual blessing. We need each other and are healed thru our brokenness.

As I said in the beginning—you are each a GIFT, whether you are the care-giver or the care-receiver. GIFT—giving it forward today.

In our scripture this morning, 7 people were called to assist the apostles in caring for the congregation. Stephen Ministers are called to assist our pastors in caring for all of you.

Maybe God has gifted you and is calling you to give those gifts forward today by signing up to take the Stephen Minister training in January. You don't need to be able to fix people; that's God's job! You just need to be willing to sit with someone through their pain and be a good listener. Voskamp says that Christ's cross allows you to hold the pain of others because that cross is absorbing all your pain.

Maybe God has gifted you with brokenness and is calling you to be a care receiver. Voskamp says that the way to live with your broken heart is to give it away. What you need to heal is to give away your own brokenness. By accepting a Stephen Minister to sit with you in your brokenness, you are also gifting that person with the opportunity to witness God's healing love in your life.

In the fellowship of the broken, we are not afraid of brokenness; we don't need to try to fix anyone's brokenness, or try to hide it or judge it.

If you or someone you know needs a care giver in the form of a Stephen Minister, encourage them to share their brokenness.

The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we all are co-workers in God's service, whether as the care giver or the care receiver—both are important GIFTS.

We give thanks because he has chosen us and will use our brokenness to bring healing not only to ourselves but to others.

Voskamp says, "First steps always seem like not enough, but they are the bravest, and they start the journey to where you're meant to go. It takes great trust to believe in the smallness of beginnings."

Are you ready to take the first step to become a Stephen Minister? or to ask for a Stephen Minister to come share your life? If you have questions about Stephen Ministry, please visit our table in fellowship hall after the service today or on next 3 Sundays. If you desire to have a Stephen Minister, talk with any of our pastors or Stephen Ministers in complete confidentiality.

We give thanks for our many gifts, including our brokenness. Now may each of you be God's GIFT--Give It Forward Today by doing a small kindness for someone or just being the gift of presence. Allow your brokenness and vulnerability to be a gift to others.