

There's nothing like receiving a care package in the mail. Care packages have no strings, no obligations attached to them, no required action to take like bills. A care package is just what it sounds like: a package full of caring.

I am fortunate to have many happy memories of getting one of those slips of paper in my mailbox at college and seminary that said I had a package waiting for me in the mailroom and can still remember how good I felt walking back to my dorm or apartment carrying my care package. My family was very good at sending thoughtful care packages. My grandma never failed to send a box of my favorite homemade cookies. And my mother and siblings could be very creative with the care packages they sent. I remember having a tough semester in college, although I've forgotten what about that semester was so very tough, but I still remember the contents of the care package my mom and siblings sent me that semester. It was a toy from my adolescence; a stuffed ALF doll from the popular TV family comedy show my family and I enjoyed watching together. For those who don't remember ALF was a snarky but good-hearted character, an alien stranded on earth living with a typical American family trying to figure out us human beings. Inside the care package was the ALF doll with a note from ALF explaining he had heard I was having a tough time, so he wanted to come and be with me. The care package also included a couple boxes of cookies, and the contents of one of the boxes was mostly eaten, presumably by ALF himself, who had a famously voracious appetite.

This care package made me laugh and made me feel the connection and support of my family, even though they were several hundred miles away. I decided to put the ALF doll in my backpack, with his head sticking out, which generated a lot of conversation around campus and gave me a way to find support in my community too, and as I remember, just seeing ALF, helped brighten up what was a tough semester for other students too. All from a little bit of loving care from my family in package.

As loving as my care packages were, they aren't quite as revelational as the care packages Leslie Jamison received the year she spent in Wales working for a travel company. Ms. Jamison, who is a writer and assistant professor at Columbia University, was 20 years old the year she spent working in Wales, and the care packages were from her boyfriend, who was in the process of studying to become a rabbi. She recently wrote about the care packages he sent to her in a piece for the New York Times. In the article she talked about how she loved their relationship because of how easy it was for her to put them in roles that were simple to live into. He was the

domestic one, the homebody, the stable one she could always depend on, and she fancied herself the wild, carefree one, who was always seeking adventure. She found comfort in his stability, especially when she went too far in living into her wild side. But that year in Wales was a real eye-opener for her. It turned out to be less exciting than her expectations, made her feel like an outsider who couldn't pronounce the names of the places she visited and made her realize she wasn't happy in the life of the wanderer because of her shyness and fear. But those care packages from her boyfriend turned out to be an anchor for her. She recalled feeling that the only place she felt she belonged was waiting in line at post offices for those care packages with her name carefully written on them. The love those care packages represented not only served as her sense of belonging, upon later reflection Ms. Jamison wrote how they showed her what her relationship with her boyfriend really was for her. She loved her boyfriend not for what she lacked, but his traits of domesticity represented to her those parts of herself that she had yet to acknowledge and live into: the desire for family, routine, and a sense of home.

Eventually, she and her boyfriend went their separate ways, but she writes how even today the memory of those care packages still help her feel grounded, especially when going through difficulties, because they were evidence that she was loved. She herself wrote it this way: "Even the ghost of love can ground you wherever you've landed even years after you've flung yourself away from it."

Leslie Jamison's beautiful reflection on care packages, the love they represent and the powerful message they can give reminded me of the man who received this same love from Jesus in today's Gospel. Because he is rich, - at least we presume he is rich because of his many possessions - his actions and question about what he needs to do to inherit eternal life is often viewed as an attempt to ask Jesus how much he needs to write his check for so he can feel comforted in continuing to live his life style. But Jesus tells him no one can buy their way into God's Kingdom, not with money, not with good deeds, only by giving up self, and following him. The disciples then appear as distressed as the man who went away grieving and Jesus assures them they will be okay, because all things are possible with God.

Now there really isn't anything wrong with that sermon. I've preached it before, as have many other preachers before me. But the only problem I see with this interpretation is how it quickly glosses over the part about Jesus loving this man. The part where Jesus looked at the man and loved him. I believe that is significant because it is one of the very few places in this or any of the Gospels where it states so simply that Jesus loved someone. In Mark's Gospel the word love only appears two other

times, and that is when Jesus told his summary of the law: to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. So I believe there is something powerful going on in this moment, when Jesus looked at the man and loved him.

Jesus expressed this love by pointing out what the man lacked or maybe like Leslie Jamison, still needed to accept in himself, and issuing a challenge to help him do so. Several commentators I read picked up on this and their only response was to say, if this is how Jesus shows love, then they didn't want any of it. And that, I believe is the whole point of this story in Mark's Gospel. This IS the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ.

The trouble is, I feel too often we human beings want love to be something soft, soothing, preferably dipped in chocolate and coated with some other sweetness to drown out taste of how complex of love. Too often, we human beings seem to think love is about feeling good, like falling in love. But love, especially God's love for us, isn't so soft, or squishy, or sweet. And thank God for that, because have you seen us? We need a love that is far tougher, far stronger, and far more beautiful to endure with all our human complexities. I don't have to take the time to describe to you all how hard it can be to love us human beings at times.

That's where the piece Leslie Jamison wrote for the New York Times about care packages comes in. These care packages were filled with love; not just the love her boyfriend had for her, but it was a love that showed her the divine love of God, that upon reflection showed her the parts of herself she did not want to see or admit were part of her, because they weren't the stereotype or shadow of herself she wanted to create. And that's love. It wasn't soft or squishy, and it might not have made her feel good at first, but is what gave her a sense of belonging, a sense of home in a foreign place, and that is what she needed far more than candy or beads or whatever was inside those boxes. And it has taken her a lifetime to grow into that love and what that love showed her about herself. It wasn't a quick, easy thing to do, but she did find a way to live into the life that love showed her. And that is love, the love of God, love that is strong enough to endure, even when it is just a memory.

And that is the love of God Jesus showed the man who came and knelt before him one day. And it is the love we are all going to experience again in a few moments when Ingrid is baptized. Baptism is one of those happy times for all of us: for Ingrid and her family, for the church, you all know I love baptisms. Because they are about the power of God's love and how it washes away our need to be held captive to the systems we create for ourselves; the ones that try to convince us power is better than mercy, or love is about control instead of self-sacrifice, or winning is everything. These are systems that seek to keep us from growing into the Kingdom of God's love where there is room for all of us. Baptism is a beautiful start to a whole life committed to

doing what Jesus calls the man in today's Gospel to do: to follow him. Sometimes people assume the man never followed Jesus because he went away grieving, but we don't know the rest of his story. Maybe he did follow Jesus. Another problem we human beings tend to have is we want the story over quickly, when it really takes a lifetime to follow Jesus. And that is the life Ingrid is starting today, a life we will all, in various ways, have the joyful honor to watch and support. We can all love Ingrid. But that's not all Baptism is. It's also us welcoming Ingrid into God's family of love, which means we all are going to let Ingrid love us. So maybe there will be moments when one of us will have to look at Ingrid and love her, like Jesus did, and likewise, there may very well be moments when Ingrid is going to look at us and love us as Jesus did, and challenge us to live deeper into what God is calling us to. And I dearly hope and pray she will, because that is how we grow into the dream God has for us.

In its way, the sacrament of Baptism is like care package, a grounding for us, no matter where we are, reminding us of God's tremendous love for us, and filling us with what we need to grow into God's love. Which means, no matter where we are, we can be that sense of home for each other, as we love and care for each other as God loves us. Dear Ingrid, thank you for this reminder, we needed it, and thank you for the love you are bringing to the Body of Christ, we will be better for your presence, and I hope you are better for knowing us. Thanks be to God!