

One of the things that we call can do at times is to compare ourselves with others. And when someone does something better, or maybe seems to be in a better situation than we are, even if that person has done nothing to offend us, it can truly poison a relationship and cause us to lose sight not just of our gifts, but of God's love too.

Some years ago, Shawnelle Eliassen, today a Christian writer and blogger, learned this lesson at her school's Halloween costume contest.

She recalls the day of the big contest asking her friend Gina how she looked.

"Old" was her response - something a kid is more than happy to hear. But in this case, it was a costume. Shawnelle tugged at the eyeholes of her wrinkled, rubber mask and adjusted her spectacles. Her mom and her had worked on her costume for 2 days, and she looked like a grandmother. She had pantyhose, shoes, a handbag, even a dress from her grandma's own closet. She'd even been practicing her walk to look like a grandmother. It was the perfect costume.

Gina tugged her skirt and told her the parade was about to begin, a tradition at their school.

The music sounded in the gym, and the procession began. Shawnelle steadied herself in her grandma's shoes and grabbed her cane.

This costume contest was a big deal for the junior high. It took forever it seemed for it to begin after lunch, but then the fun began. There was a half hour for costume prep, and the teachers judged the costumes and there was a gift certificate prize taped to a jumbo box of candy. Shawnelle was sure the jackpot was hers.

She had been thinking of her costume for a long time. She wanted to win. She didn't care s much about the gift certificate though looking back, rather, she wanted the recognition. She wasn't one of the popular girls, though she had a fair number of friends. Winning the contest wouldn't be a ticket to being popular, but it would sure make Shawnelle look cooler.

Gina asked her to move faster in the parade, but Shawnelle was stuck. The reason? Marie. Marie was dressed as a ladybug. She took tiny steps in her red knee-high socks. Even Shawnelle, who wanted to intentionally go a little slower dressed as a grandma, thought Marie wasn't going fast enough.

As for that costume and Marie? Well Shawnelle felt pitty. Marie never seemed to have what she needed. She had a hard time with schoolwork. She had many brothers and sisters but Shawnelle had never observed her with a friend. Her hair was often unkempt and either stuck out in wild tufts or was matted to her head. Her clothes also didn't fit. Even her ladybug costume had seen better days. From behind Shawnelle could see that her spots were frayed and were pulling loose. Her antenna was bent. Her red tights had a long snag.

But Shawnelle stopped thinking about Marie as they neared the judges table. "Almost there" Shawnelle whispered. Several teachers laughed as she shuffled by, and her confidence was high. She'd done a thorough assessment of the costumes before the parade began. Lots of ghosts, plenty of ghouls. Shawnelle knew though her costume was the most authentic.

They'd gone full circle around the gym when the music stopped. The judges came out from behind the table and walked in a slow circle, taking one last look at the costumes. A low buzz of conversation spread across the gym as vampires and musclemen talked about who would win.

Gina said to Shawnelle that she had it. She saw the judges laugh when she walked by.

Shawnelle said maybe, but that Gina's costume was great too.

The moment of truth was now there. Shawnelle was getting nervous and trying to remain confident.

Mrs. Bronner blew a whistle and the crowd hushed - it was time to name the winner.

"I'd like to compliment all of you on your great costumes," she said. "They are wonderful this year."

Mrs. Bronner was walking in Shawnelle's direction.

"But, we have one costume that is really, really special," she continued.

Shawnelle's heart was racing. She continued to walk closer and closer and stopped right in front of Shawnelle. And then she said: "This year's Halloween costume winner is...the ladybug. Marie, congratulations, you've won!"

Shawnelle was in disbelief. She looked at Gina to see if she had in fact heard the same thing; Gina shrugged. Mrs. Bronner gave Marie a hug. Everyone clapped. Marie jumped up and down and was so excited one of her wings fell off.

As for Shawelle, she was convinced her costume was better. She pulled the rubber mask from her face and drew some fresh air. Then she bent to pick up Marie's wing, and told her she did a good job, even though frustration filled her heart. She felt a sense of injustice as she looked at her costume, balled now in a shopping bag under her seat.

The bus ride home was long. It moved over the windy country road. The leaves had turned harvest orange and gold, something she'd normally appreciate. But this couldn't improve the sullen mood.

After a mile or so the bus slowed and stopped in front of a well worn home - Marie's. She moved up the aisle, toting her costume bag. Then she nearly tripped down the steps. The driver waited patiently then snapped the door shut when her feet hit the solid ground outside the bus.

As the bus began to creep forward again, Shawnelle sighed and looked out her window. She saw the front door of the house open, and Marie's mother came out and stood on the landing. Marie ran up the sidewalk, dropped her bag, and rushed into her mother's arms. The clasped hands and

jumped together. Then Marie let go to fish through her bag for the prize. She retrieved it and there was more celebration.

Shawnelle craned her neck to see more but the bus picked up speed. Marie and her mom became tiny people, then little specks lost behind the trees. All of a sudden it didn't matter to Shawnelle that she had not won. She didn't care that the cool girls hadn't clamored around her in her victory, and she wondered why on earth did she want it that badly.

The win for Marie was far more important for her, but Shawnelle realized that in witnessing such a tender scene, seeing what mattered most, she'd been given a prize too.

Like Shawnelle, all of us are given a prize too - the love of God. Just like Marie getting off that bus and being embraced by her mom, that same thing will be waiting for us. The thing of it is though it's up to us to respond to the love that God has given us, which is why Jesus so often stresses that we must love one another as He has loved us. Doing so is a bit complicated though, and we see this unfold in our Gospel for this weekend.

We have the story of the landowner who hires day laborers. Each one works, but those who come late and work less are given the same amount by the land owner. On the surface, it might seem unfair to us. But the parable isn't meant to be an example of employment law. It's meant to illustrate exactly what Shawnelle saw when she saw Marie's mother give her a loving hug: that God is generous. This is how God treats people, with love. And it's why in heaven, one will find cradle Catholics, and those who changed their ways and learned to love God later in life, and some who's love was perfected even after they died. God's love is powerful stuff.

The problem though for us is like Shawnelle, we can become a bit short-sighted as humans. We can get focused on the things that don't matter that much in the grand scheme of things, such as winning a costume contest. Thankfully Shawnelle figured out what ultimately mattered by the end of the bus ride, and realized she had a lot of blessings. The Gospel challenges us this week to be mindful of God's love, but also to think about the role of envy in our life.

Remember envy was the sin of Lucifer along with pride. And envy can lead a person to do evil things to possess the goods of other. More often than not though envy just leads to sadness. "Sorrow at another's good fortune" is how Saint Thomas Aquinas described it. So what are we to do?

I think first it's worth thinking about where envy is in our lives, and along with it pride to which it's closely related. It's not something confessed all that often, because perhaps we don't think about it. Most people probably aren't too envious of celebrities or people who seem not too much like them. But sometimes we can be just like Shawnelle and be envious of a coworker, a classmate, friend or family member. It comes in many forms and the list of things we can be envious of is endless. Envy led Cain to murder Abel, and while most of us aren't likely to get to that level, how many relationships can be poisoned because of envy? When we see that, it's worth listening to the advice of Pope Francis. In a Wednesday audience he had a few years ago, he spoke on envy and jealousy, and said: "When I am jealous, I must say to the Lord: 'Thank

you, Lord, for you have given this to that person'." So try to not be jealous, but rather be thankful that there's a person who has been blessed, and who maybe found a gift they needed.

Second, when we are jealous, Pope Francis warns against a "holier than thou" attitude. In his words: "This is bad, do not do that! When you are tempted to this, remember your sins, those no one knows, shame yourself before God and say, 'You, Lord, you know who is superior, I close my mouth'. Remember Job? He had it out with God and when God basically tells him "who do you think you are? Were you here when I created all of this? Do you know all I know?" Job is reduced to silence when confronted with God's superiority. But sometimes to make ourselves feel better than others whom we envy, we can think of how we are better than they are, and put ourselves above them. That really don't do much good though.

Recognizing when there is envy and jealousy in our hearts, we need to then make sure it doesn't keep growing or simmering below the surface, but is confronted. The antidote is love.

We remember that God is in love with us. And you can't limit God's love. It's not like other things that somehow go away or are reduced and you fight over. Rather it is endless and infinite. God loves us all in the same way. That should not bother us. Rather it should fill us with joy. There is only one you in all of creation, and you are precious and special to God. Love is free and undeserved. So much like a good coach says that he doesn't want to hear is player worry about what the other guys are doing but about what he, that player, is doing, we should focus not on what we don't have, but one what we do have. We have God's love. And we have gifts, though these may differ. God dispenses His gifts as He seems fit. His gifts are not given just on the basis of a person's talent. Remember, we are many parts and all one body.

With that in mind, we focus on using our gifts for the building up of the body. We might not have the gift that another has, but that doesn't mean we are lacking. Rather it means we need to look at what we've got, and use it for good, rather than brooding over what we don't have and wasting time in the process.

Lastly, we must remember that treating others with kindness can do such good. Shawnelle didn't say to Marie "I should have won" or "your costume was actually pretty bad, they just let you win because you have no friends." But a truly envious person would have done that. And that would have destroyed the happiness that Marie felt at that moment. We can do that with our words, or lack of charity or appreciation for others. Instead, Shawnelle congratulated Marie and helped her when part of her costume fell off, even if there was some envy in her heart, she didn't let it take over. Treating others with true love can help us appreciate their gifts more, and we just might learn more about their good qualities, find new friendships, and also learn more about our own talents in the process too. Shawnelle said it best at the close of her story, saying she learned something far more valuable than an award for a costume contest would have given her.

I spent the last few days in New York City, and it was a wonderful trip photographing the city. But the one thing that amazed me was how many people were taking pictures of themselves, especially younger people, but even some older people too. In some cases they weren't even able to get a landmark in the back. I finally broke down at one point and said "I'd be happy to take your photo for you if you'd like the skyline in the background." Now there's nothing wrong with taking a photograph of yourself. But when we make ourselves the center of the world, and want

to show people just what we can do when we forget about others, that's a problem. New York is a beautiful city created by people who used their gifts to become construction workers, fire fighters, police officers, sanitation workers, and many other things that they discovered as life went on. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have been seeing the beautiful sights and enjoying the great city. But at the heart of it all is God, who created these people and gave them gifts. Much like a rainbow is only brilliant because all the colors come together, the same is true with you and me. May we rejoice in all that we have, and build one another up by being thankful for the gifts that we all have, and above all else rejoice in the fact that we are loved by our God who shows no favorites, just gives love freely, and asks us to pass it on. For when we do that, we can truly transform this world into the kingdom that Jesus promised.