

At various points in our lives, we might get our hearts set on something that we long for. Something that if only we obtain it, it will make us so happy.

For Bob Walsh, a lifelong Catholic who went on to work in the banking and financial services industry, and write several financial and religious books along the way, he recalls as a child learning a lesson that at first seemed to be about finances, but in the end was something much more valuable.

The summer he turned ten, his father helped him to buy his first ten-speed bicycle. It was used, and the previous owner was the parish priest, Fr. Allen. Bob put up \$60 of his grass cutting and snow shoveling money, and his dad put up the other half. Bob would pay him back in installments over the next six months. Although it was the kind of bike you'd expect a priest to have he says (dull silver, slightly worn, of course no baseball cards in the spokes), it was Bob's ticket to the adult world.

He spent that summer and autumn writing as if to put Greg Lemons to shame. His sister Liz, a prisoner of her five-speed and banana seat, never had a chance to keep up with Bob. They'd always been stuck with hand-me-downs from their older brothers and sisters, a few of whom had notoriously bad taste in bikes. Now, however, Bob was able to ride to every corner of town, sometimes even as far as the beach. In those heady days before one acquires a driver's license, a good bike, Bob reflected, was like a magic carpet.

Just before the Christmas deadline to pay his dad back, they were hit with several snowstorms. This allowed Bob to shovel enough driveways to pay off his debt. Now, he was officially a bike owner. It was a feeling unlike any other.

Bob notes that while his mom and dad were great parents, they could not be trusted with the awesome responsibility of buying appropriate Christmas presents. They were too quick to pass off gloves, sneakers and shirts as "presents." And while they would say a prayer over the Baby Jesus in the manger on the way to church, Jesus seemed too busy at this time of year to leave presents under the tree. The kids outsourced their requests for the really good presents to Santa.

For her family of 7 kids, Bob's mom developed a system in which she decorated the outside of seven large boxes with different types of wallpaper. Each of the kids had their own box that contained six or so presents, and they would close their eyes and reach in to grab one when it was their turn. This cut down on hours of wrapping and satisfied his dad's sense of order that he acquired from being in the Navy.

The downside though, which you too may have experienced growing up, is that everyone opened one present at a time so all could "appreciate" one another's gifts. Bob remembers that neither Liz nor he "appreciated" this system because they went last as the two youngest. After the obligatory "oohs" and "aahs" each of the kids held up their present for family review, a process that averaged about five minutes between each present, so patience was in short supply - when one of the kids pulled out a belt or package of underwear, he and Liz seethed the entire time.

His dad, a master showman, liked to keep a few of Santa's better presents for the end. On that fateful Christmas morning, he gave Bob a used portable record player. He was ecstatic - for he was finally untethered from the "family stereo" that all of the kids fought over.

However, his elation was short-lived after his dad called his sister to the kitchen. "We have one more gift for you," he said as he opened the door that led to the garage. There, on the steps, stood a brand new ten-speed Schwinn. Liz screamed in joy. But Bob did not hear those screams of joy. All he remembers hearing was the sputtering engine of the lawnmower, the endless scraping of the metal snow shovel on concrete. He'd endured far too many hours of indentured servitude for his used bike; that Santa could give Liz this sparkling machine less than a week later was a sign that he was losing his touch. Perhaps, he thought, Mrs. Claus was putting something in his food.

Bob slumped onto the floor. His ten-speed chariot had turned into a pumpkin in the time it took his sister to hop on the gleaming leather seat.

"Let's go for a ride, Rob!" she sang, his dad holding the bike upright as she put her feet on the pedals.

"Too snowy to ride," Bob muttered, pushing the record player father away from him. The symbolism seemed lost on his dad.

Christmas was ruined for Bob. He seethed for the rest of the day, then the rest of the week. His dad was not someone to whom you complained about presents, not if you ever wanted to see another anyway. Santa always seems to lose interest after Christmas too, rarely accepting returns or trade-ins. That left the Baby Jesus, but He wasn't answering Bob's prayers either - he could tell that his prayers went unanswered because Liz's bike had yet to crumble into a pile of rust flakes.

After a few weeks of watching Bob pout, his dad finally pulled him aside, and said "everything okay?"

"It's not fair," Bob whined. "I worked so hard for my bike, and it's not even new. Then Liz gets a brand new bike as soon as I make the final payment. She didn't have to do anything for it."

Bob's dad smiled. "She didn't have to do anything for it because it's not really for her," he said, and then left the room.

What did that mean, Bob thought to himself. He didn't want her bike - it had the girly bar that sloped down to the ground and a flowery white basket on the handlebars. Bob could turn it in for a new set of action figures, he thought, but she'd been on it every day since Christmas, so no way they'd let him take the bike back now. Bob eventually got over it, chalking it up to elf error (the naughty and nice list can be cumbersome after all).

By spring, Liz and Bob though were doing something different. He was no longer riding ahead of her. Instead, now they were riding all over town together now that she could keep up. Sure, he'd lose her on the steep slopes, but Bob always let her catch up when they went downhill. Bob

reflects now years later that initially the youngest kids in a big family can form a bond out of necessity - older siblings can be taxing and sometimes there are only so many locked doors one can hide behind. Sometimes, he says, you need someone else in the foxhole with you.

As they grew, they became not just siblings, but true friends. They biked down to swim at the local pool, then put in seven miles to take the free town tennis lessons together. They planned secret parties when their parents went on trips and played a game of "Who can leave less gas in the tank" when they finally got their drivers' licenses. Bob relied on her to put names to faces when they were at parties, and she treated his best friends as her personal dating service. They ended up at the same college, and graduated the same year.

Still despite all this, Bob says he wasn't smart enough to figure out what his dad meant until many years later. That brand new bike was not a gift for Liz - it really was a gift for Bob.

It took that gift for Bob's eyes to be opened, and it takes God bursting into our world for our eyes to be opened too. The problem is sometimes like Bob, we don't see the real gift we are given from our God at Christmas, because we can be too preoccupied and distracted. But all of us are Bob, all of us are Liz, and all of us have the ability to be like his dad, if only we open our eyes and hearts to the true meaning of Christmas.

In the story, Liz loves being with her older brother Bob and biking with him, but on her smaller bike, she can't ever keep up with her brother. You can think of life like a bike ride. On our own, we are like her, able to go a little ways, but inevitably falling behind because there's only so much we can do with our bike. On top of that, sometimes the tire goes flat and the chain falls off, because we fall into sin. We neglect to take care of the bike, and that's what we do to our souls. We push others away. We think things will make us happy and they don't. We become stubborn and refuse to listen to others. We become addicted to things that we know are wrong, but lead to short term pleasure. And through it all we so often deny that there are any problems at all, and we sink further and further into darkness.

Pretty depressing if it were not for the father. The birth of Jesus is announced by the angels to the shepherds the people on the margins, literally in the dark because that's how they worked and the city people didn't want anything to do with them. As we go through life so often making bad decisions, pushing others away, our God gives us a lot more than a 10 speed Schwinn. He gives us Himself. He makes Himself a vulnerable little infant. And He comes to show us how to love. How to live. How to care for one another. That's what Christmas is about. God is knocking at the door of your heart. There wasn't any room for Him at the inn; how about in your hearts and souls? Rekindle that relationship with God. Make a few minutes for prayer every day. Come to Mass, knowing you are always welcome. Celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation and hear those words "your sins are forgiven, go in peace." Know that if you were the only person in the world, God still would have come to live and die for you. There is only one person like you in all of creation - and you are precious to God. So get to know Him, because when you do, His love, His grace will change your 5-speed bike into something that will take you through the journey of this life into heaven.

But like the wise father in the story who gave both Bob and his sister Liz love, he also gave them the ability to learn, because he saw the potential in his son. He knew he needed to grow, and so he gave him the means, but it was up to Bob to figure it out. It took time, but eventually he learned the meaning of “the gift wasn’t for her.” God does the same for us. Jesus comes and is born, and then lives and performs miracles, but teaches. He says as He washes the feet of the apostles, as I the master have done so you must do the same for one another. In our second reading the letter to Titus, we hear “the grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires” and that Jesus Christ gave himself for us so that we would be cleansed and “eager to do what is good.” Jesus shows us how to love, which means we have to ask ourselves who are the people like Liz in our life that we need to see? Who are we estranged from we need to forgive? Who may be hurting in silence and needs us to be more proactive and be a part of their life? Who do we make excuses that we are too busy to spend time with? Who do we neglect, or gossip about or put down? If we claim to be a Christian, love does not mean just a Christmas gift or card. It means we open our eyes every day, and bring God’s love to all the people who may be walking in darkness. The gift of our time, of a conversation, of listening, a kind word to a person, all these things can do so much to help a person on their own journey through life, but sometimes we have to be the one to help them to get back on the right track. God’s given us a gift to do just that, like Bob we just have to realize it.

As you go home, you’ll likely gather with family and loved ones, and tear open some gifts. My guess is Santa has something special for you, and you’ll see a lot of smiles as the gifts are opened no matter what you get. But as you see those gifts opened, look into the faces of the people who open them. And as you come to Communion, look upon the host, and upon the Christ child in the nativity. Think about the great gift God has given you in life, and of the love that He gives you day in and day out. And look into the eyes of the people who fill your life, and ask yourself every day, what do I need to give these people that isn’t in a package throughout the year. Ask God every day that same question as you look not to just your families, but to all the people God puts in your life. The gift of Jesus is an incredible gift to us all. So many like Bob just don’t know what they’ve been given at first, so open your eyes, open your hearts, and let Him in. Let Him transform you into the person that you know you can become, and use that love to transform one another and the world with the light of the love. Remember the words of Saint Leo the Great who said:

Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition. Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom.

May that light shine on you forever, and may we daily strive to be a people of light who rescue one another from the power of darkness and bring them into the light of God’s kingdom by using the grace and love we have been given from our loving God.