Entitled or Empowered? Paying It Forward

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Last week, Christian Brothers University hosted a very special luncheon on our campus, bringing together donors and scholarship recipients. At each table, these donors, who specifically requested that their gifts support student scholarships, had the opportunity to get to know the students that were benefitting from their generous scholarships. Without their contributions, these students might have missed the opportunity to attend a Catholic, Lasallian university and to benefit from strong academic programs in a faith-based setting.

Following the luncheon, donors, many who provided more than one scholarship, were photographed with student recipients. You could see both the pride and the gratitude on the faces of all those attending the event. My hope was that each CBU student sitting with their donors had spent the majority of the luncheon thanking them. I was not disappointed. While it may seem that many feel a sense of entitlement these days, particularly Millennials who are often described as the "me generation," CBU students expressed extreme gratitude and appreciation for the opportunities provided by these donors.

Prior to and during the luncheon, I used the time to personally thank donors, which gave me a chance to meet many of these individuals for the first time. I was particularly gratified to meet and get to know a former Board of Trustees member who was a lifelong supporter of CBU students through an endowed family scholarship donation. In fact, no longer living in Memphis full time, he decided to augment that scholarship at the event. We spoke at length, and after the luncheon, he toured the CBU campus which he had not seen in awhile. Two days later, I was notified that the gentlemen had fallen on some steps and was in critical condition, subsequently passing away a few days later.

As you can imagine, I was shocked by the news and conveyed my deepest condolences to his family during the memorial service. My message to his family was that his spirit lives on in the lives of the students able to attend CBU through his generous contributions to our scholarship fund. Subsequently, I included the scholarship luncheon photograph of his wife, the students and him in the sympathy card I sent. To me, this photograph symbolized the very essence of the three core CBU values, faith, service and community. As tragic and sudden as his death was, it illuminates several important lessons.

First, humans often have a sense of entitlement when good things happen, as in the New Testament when Jesus cured the lepers and only one returned to give thanks. Who have you thanked today for your good job, happy life and opportunities? Or, do you feel that all your blessings are the result of your own merits? Do we pray to God only when we need assistance, or do we also take time to pray thankfully? What better time than during this season of thanks to incorporate more "thank yous" into our everyday routines?

Secondly, if the "thief comes during the night" as happened to this CBU benefactor, will the meaning and value of your life be enhanced because you paid it forward as was the case with this individual? The life of our donor is clearly reflected in the smiling faces of the students found in those photographs. Paying it forward does not involve only material wealth. It encompasses how we treat individuals with whom we interact on a daily basis....the kind words of encouragement, teaching someone a new skill, doing someone a favor. These actions reflect meaning and value in our own lives, as well as the lives of others, even after we transcend this earthly existence. They offer a window to eternity.

I thank God for the opportunity to have met this very special person who by example taught me several very important life lessons.....to thank often and find opportunities to pay it forward.