

Help others believe in their own goodness

By Father Joseph Breighner

As we enter the season of “buying presents,” what’s the best gift we can give to another person? I would like to suggest that it is not online or on a shelf. The best gift we can give is to help someone else to believe in his or her own goodness.

Let me tell a story: “Bum” showed up at one of my weekend retreats. “I was a bum,” he said. “If you left your car door open, I slept in your car. If you left your money in your car, I took it. I slept on grates downtown, on manhole covers. I earned my name.”

Bum began to drink because he felt worthless.

“My brother could take apart an airplane engine, and put it back together, and the plane would fly,” he said. “I couldn’t screw in a lightbulb without breaking it. He was handsome, had all the women, and made a lot of money. I was nothing.”

Then, at age 38, the brother who had everything and could do everything committed suicide.

“I remember standing next to his coffin,” he said, “and my family coming by and saying: ‘We could have understood if you had killed yourself. Your life’s a waste. You have nothing to live for. But we can’t understand your brother doing it.’ ”

But then he learned that his brother had also been into drugs and alcohol. Not long afterward, Bum’s nephew, just 18, also killed himself. A young man who had everything to live for decided not to live.

So, Bum got a gun and decided to end it all. He loaded the gun, put it to his head, placed his finger on the trigger – and then the phone rang. It was his sister, calling to thank him for being there when her son killed himself.

“She was going on and on, praising me, but I couldn’t hear it,” he said. “I kept saying to myself: ‘Would you please get off the phone so I can kill myself?’ ”

Finally, his sister hung up. Bum picked up the gun again, held it to his head, went to squeeze the trigger, and the phone rang again. This time it was his brother-in-law, who started yelling: “Who you been on the phone with? I’ve been calling you for the last half hour. We’re down here at the bowling alley. There’s only three of us. We need a fourth. Get down here!”

Bum put the phone down, and went bowling.

I tell his story for a couple of reasons. First, it reminds us that no life is ever without value. Never kill yourself. Never hurt yourself. Never believe you have nothing to

live for.

Bum has since ministered to countless young people through Alcoholics Anonymous. "All these young people hang around me," he said. "They say I'm an inspiration to them. I never thought I would inspire anybody."

The second reason for telling his story is that it answers the question of the best gift we can give for Christmas. Help someone else to believe in his or her own goodness. I think the kind words his sister spoke actually helped a man called "Bum" to hear the invitation from his brother-in-law. It takes a lot of kindness to rebuild a wounded personality. Did you notice that it wasn't a sermon that saved Bum? It was an invitation to go bowling.

We literally save other people's lives when we include them, invite them to play a game, join us for lunch, encourage them to sit at our table. Haven't we all felt the hurt of feeling unwelcome, of being the last one picked for a game, of not being invited to sit with the group?

So the best gift we can give this Christmas is already inside us. Smiling at someone in a mall, holding a door for a stranger, complimenting someone on how they look, praising someone for what they've done, noticing and welcoming the person that no one else notices or welcomes.

On the 25th anniversary of his sobriety, Bum told his A.A. group that he wanted a little respect. So they began to call him "Mr. Bum."

Today he celebrates the holidays in heaven. So I guess we could go one step further and call him "St. Bum."