

John 3:14-21
Ephesians 2:1-10
March 10, 2024

God's Great Love

As you know, when I was in high school, I was a runner. I went to a large high school at which there was not enough room for the freshmen, so they attended one of two junior highs, which meant we had two 9th grade cross country teams. Put together we did not lose any races. There were ten good runners and it appeared that we had a promising future.

But in the 10th grade there were only five left, and before we finished only three. Although there were multiple reasons, the most common is that people decided not to continue running simply because they did not want to run. Their heart was not in it.

In life, there are some things that will not work unless one's heart is engaged, and running is one of those things. There must be a drive, to endure hardship and inconvenience, and to give up other opportunities. I remember understanding when my teammates, several of them, chose other things.

Lent is a season of the year devoted to the second half of the public ministry of Jesus, as he makes his way south from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. It is a time of thoughtful reflection, humility and repentance, and preparation. A time to reset the heart.

Very often Lent is a quiet but serious time in which we as believers consider the pain and suffering of Jesus, and by extension the world's pain and suffering, and even, the meaning of our own pain. It can be somber.

While we make these considerations, spring begins to take shape, each day a little more. The cold spells are not as cold, the warm days are warmer, and last a little longer. The goal is to prepare for Easter, so there is anticipation, even joy in the somber reflection.

In addition to thinking about the cross and about the suffering and rejection Jesus faced, the troubles he had trying to explain to his followers what was happening; the tragedy of the world's life, it is also right for us to consider, in a more positive vein, the Christian hope.

God has been revealed as Creator, Redeemer, Reconciler. The first word that must be used in these considerations is love, and the second, grace. We have two great texts this morning to guide our thinking. The conversation in John in which we read those famous lines, "For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Paul, the great interpreter of the meaning of the gospel, of salvation, also gives us lines by which we can live, and through which we learn more about these considerations.

He writes, “because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, makes us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - *it is by grace you have been saved . . .*” And he repeats himself, “for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not of ourselves - *it is the gift of God.*” Love and Grace and Faith.

This message, which is the message of the Lenten season, and of the gospel for the whole year, is a positive message.

Love and grace and kindness and mercy, they offer a respite from the sobriety of Lent, that the context of our thoughts and observances is one of great majesty and wonder, and beauty, and it is hard to conceive anything better to give our attention. And to ask questions.

What does it mean that life and salvation are gifts? What does it mean that God is revealed as love, as being gracious and kind, as Redeemer? By way of an answer, consider this thought;

There is only one reason God gave life to the world and to each person, and there is only one reason God grants redemption - and that is because God wants to give life and redemption, which are God will, because God loves. And it is a great love.

Upon reflection, how could it be otherwise? What is the value in any activity under compulsion? Imagine being a friend or a teammate with someone who did

not genuinely desire to be your friend or teammate, but was present out of a sense of duty, or even compelled by a previous agreement they did not make, or one they regret, or because of a belief in some kind of reward for the friendship, or avoidance of punishment.

In other facets of life, because of particular circumstances associated with humanity, or the realities of community life, or the acknowledgment of sin, people do in fact live out of duty, or from the energy of previous agreements even if they did not participate in them, or from the anticipation of reward or fear of punishment, or from tradition even when their heart is not in it. It is possible to go through the motions without deep commitment, but just to avoid trouble, or get along.

There is value to these kinds of commitments and even honor. They protect us from chaos and from the harm that would come to a world without them, a world in which promises are not kept and commitments are allowed to shift this way and that like the wind coming down the I-70 corridor in March.

But here in the most foundational relationship - that of a person with God, only genuine desire, and sincerity of heart suffice. And in Christ Jesus, this very state of things has been revealed about God. And this very state of things is all we are being asked. Everything else flows out from this relationship. And the words we use to describe it are, “love,” and, “grace.” The name we give to the response is, “faith.”

One way to understand the negative response, and it is that it is an offense to the human spirit, that *wants* to achieve God's favor by some kind of merit, some kind of successful action or attitude of the mind or sentiment of the heart, that compels God to favor. But God wouldn't be God if under compulsion. And Jesus, and the cross, reveals God's will, God's free choice *for us*. That is the Lenten destination. That is what matters. It is ours only to *accept*, and we have been given the freedom to accept it, which is the meaning of faith. And then to wallow in it, to be immersed in God's free grace faithfully, giving texture and shape to our lives.

And Paul then finishes with more than a hint, that God's great love has an outcome, it is God's gracious purpose to give us lives of goodness;

“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

They liberates us from the tyranny of lesser concerns, from things, in a thingified world, and are the source of compassion and of the willingness to forgive and accept others, even as God has forgiven and accepted us, and they develop the character in us that enables goodness, now and forever, Amen.

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