

Fourth Weekend in Lent (RCL/B): "Love Is God's Own Truth"
Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21
March 13-14, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I was a bit of a Goody Two Shoes when I was little. Here's the back story. If you were blessed to grow up with two parents, I've gotta confirm from personal experience what you probably already know: the loss of a parent is life-shattering to a child. Some kids go off the rails, behavior-wise, after a parent dies. Others, like me, become what's sometimes referred to as an "angel child," always doing what's expected, what will please the remaining parent figures, because Heaven knows you don't want to aggravate the adults and risk having **them** abandon you, too. Without their help, **you** won't survive long either. (Let's remember that regardless of what caused the parent's death, the child **feels** abandoned, even if what the parent wanted **most of all** was to live and **not** die....)

So when you're busy being as good as possible to ensure you stay safe, sheltered and fed, even small infractions seem major. When life has hit you in the teeth with the death of a parent, then grace, mercy, the undeserved love of God that comes to us as gift, not reward, **doesn't** seem like the ruling principle of the universe. It's not just the hard-earned wisdom that life is fragile. At some level, even unconsciously, the child may feel the pain of loss is **punishment**. The myth says that parents leave, parents abandon, because children don't **deserve** their love and care.

It's no stretch at all for me to agree with Paul when he says we have "all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). It's been a bigger stretch (and a great joy) to accept that "by grace [I] have been saved" (Ephesians 2:5)... "and this is not [my] own

doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). I don’t **have** to earn it. I **can’t** earn it. No doubt, I don’t deserve it. I will never be worthy of it. I can only be grateful for it.

In his letters Paul says that since Jesus died for us, our lives are no longer our own; they’re His. He paid the ransom to free us from the hellish prison of our sins, so:

20 ... it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
(Galatians 2:20)

In fiction there’s something called a Life Debt. It’s a narrative device where one person saves another’s life, and the one who is saved then devotedly follows the “saver,” the earthly savior, ever after. For instance, as you *Star Wars* fans know, Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn saves the life of Jarjar Binks, who then owes him a Life Debt. A plot twist in some stories is that the person who did the saving then becomes responsible for **keeping** the other person safe, long-term. That’s what Jesus does for us, if we’ll just accept the on-going saving, the “salvation,” He offers.

Some days we may feel like we’re screwing up at every turn. Some years we may feel like God has the binoculars out to catch us being bad. But John 3:16-17, the heart of today’s Gospel, which Martin Luther called “the Gospel in miniature,” is there to straighten out our crooked thinking that God’s somehow out to get us:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

You wouldn’t guess that **love** is God’s own truth, if you only listened to some of the hate and fear that’s preached out there on the airwaves.

I think where the Church in general and I in particular have sometimes fallen short, failed in our preaching and teaching, is that sometimes we’ve emphasized rules more than

relationships. We've been so heavy on the "Thou shalt nots" that some folks may have gotten the impression that God's no fun at all, and God's primary job is to ruin our pleasure. But how could that possibly be, since God is the Creator who blessed us with a sense of humor and also made us capable of **so many** pleasures? Is the God who gave us tastebuds not pleased when we enjoy the velvet finish of fine dark chocolate or the sweet and zingy refreshment of homemade lemonade on a hot summer day? Doesn't the God who made us sexual beings rejoice when two come together in loving, passionate union? And isn't the heart of the God who made all of creation and rested on the seventh day glad when we take Sabbath rest from our worldly work in order to worship and to play, to refresh our souls and recharge our batteries??

In Father Bill Lago's Wednesday devotion last week, he spoke about God looking at us in love and seeing not our sin but our soul. Ours is a God who loves, not just humanity in general but each of us in particular. We do not believe that God is like a watchmaker who makes a fine time piece, winds it up, sells it and forgets about it. Scripture tells us our God is more attentive than a nursing mother. Our God marks the fall of every sparrow, no less than death of each of the half million Americans whom COVID took this past year, some of whom are known and near and dear to us. Our God sees the suffering of every child of God and reaches out with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand to heal, to deliver. Our God's "comfort" isn't just a sense-surround hug. Our God comforts by liberating, freeing us from emotional arm shackles and leg irons, bringing down the spiritual prison walls that separate us from life and love, from our Creator, our true selves and our neighbor.

Why do I believe this? Because I have seen the people I admire most and love most deeply upheld by their faith in the most trying of circumstances. Because I myself have

experienced the Presence (with a capital P). Why do I trust? Because God is faithful. Why do I love? Because I am loved. Why do I hope? Because God is the best Promise-Keeper of all.

I don't have compelling intellectual arguments to convince people who don't believe in God to believe. I do have my own experience of a Father in Heaven who provided all the caring and committed people, all the divine grace I needed, not just to survive, but to thrive, after my mother's death. Yes, I was lonely and yes, I was needy, and yes, I tried to justify my existence by being as good as I possibly could, but I was also well cared-for and **I knew I was loved**. The additional Gift Given came as a young adult when the Holy Spirit helped me realize that I don't have to earn my own salvation and that I am loved apart from what I do or don't do – that our Lord Jesus has done all the work necessary and I just need to accept the gift and live out my gratitude. For “by grace [I] have been saved ... and this is not [my] own doing; it is the gift of God.” In the story of my life, I definitely owe a Life Debt to Jesus. What's **your** story? Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham