

Reflection on the Word: Lent 4, March 14, 2021
Ephesians 2:1-2a, 4-10; John 3:14-21

In today's gospel, we hear what is no doubt the world's most famous verse of scripture – John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” This verse has been translated into more languages than any other; has often been displayed on signs and placards at sporting events, and may very well be one of the first Bible verses you ever memorized.

God so loved the world! The Greek word used for love here points to the kind of love that loves another with no thought of return or reward. That is God's kind of love for us. God does not love us because we deserve to be loved. God does not love us because God gets a reward from loving us. God just loves us. That is all.

These words of course, need to be heard and understood in the context of the verses that surround them. Jesus had been speaking to Nicodemus, a member of the Pharisees – the religious leaders of the day known for their piety, as well as their adherence to the Law and purification rituals. Jesus understood that Nicodemus, accustomed to privilege and entitlement, needed to hear that God loves the world; needed to understand that God's judgement was not like that of humans (including those in the religious institutions) which tended to

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place people inside or outside of God's grace depending on their ethnicity, social status, gender, and so forth. Jesus was trying to help Nicodemus understand that in God's eyes, all people have worth and value, and that God's love is an unconditional, unmerited gift of grace, offered to us all.

Grace – that's what the apostle Paul writes about in today's reading from Ephesians ... “It is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it.”

I sometimes think that we do not truly understand the magnitude of grace, the whole notion of God's unconditional love – freely given, no strings attached. We are so used to living in a world that is based on earning and reward ... You know, the more and harder you work, the more you will receive in return. Life throws at us mottos such as: *‘The early bird gets the worm or, there is no such thing as a free lunch.’* But God's grace is not based on what we can do, or what we deserve or earn. It is given freely and abundantly.

The story is told of a six year-old named Benjamin. Protesting his bedtime and becoming increasingly frustrated by his father's refusal to budge on allowing

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him to stay up longer, young Benjamin finally cried out, "Daddy, I hate you!" But his Dad, possessing the presence of mind which many parents wish they more frequently had, looked at his son and replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you."

And then what do you think Benjamin said? "Sorry, Dad. I love you, too?" Nope. When his Dad told him that he loved him, Benjamin just yelled back, "Don't say that!" Surprised, his dad continued, "But, Ben, it's true--I love you." "Stop saying that, Daddy!" Ben protested. And his Dad, looking at him with patience, replied: "Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!" Was that not a father's love that mirrored God's love?

I read somewhere that "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less." That when we stumble, when we struggle, when we are disobedient and unfaithful, God is always there with open arms.

Does that mean that we have nothing to do, nothing to contribute to this most important relationship? Definitely not! Once we have been loved this fully, this completely, we are moved to respond in love, honoring God and wanting to share God's love with all we meet. Such love moves us to want to throw ourselves into the joys and struggles that are all around us, always working for

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the good of our neighbor and the world, becoming witnesses to what God's love has done for us.

And perhaps there is no greater example of this than in the life of the Apostle Paul. Once a persecutor of the early Christians, he did everything he could to stop the spread of Jesus' name. And yet, by the grace of God, he was given a second chance, his whole life was turned around, and he became one of the greatest missionaries of the Christian church enduring confrontation, imprisonment, and finally martyrdom, for the sake of the Gospel.

In the book, *Everyday Greatness*, by Stephen Covey, there is a story titled "Girl Against A Blizzard." It is the harrowing story of fifteen-year-old Hazel Miner who lived on a farm near Center, North Dakota. In March, 1920, on a Monday, Hazel, her brother, Emmet who was eleven, and her younger sister Myrdith, while returning home from school, were trapped in a sudden, monster snow storm. A massive search was soon underway, but the weather was far too severe for the searchers to go about their business with much success.

The powerful storm blew drifts above the fence posts obscuring all sense of direction and also making progress impossible for the children and their horse. Suddenly the sleigh tipped over on its side. In the howling darkness,

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fifteen-year-old Hazel realized it was up to her, the oldest, to figure a way out.

In the dark of the capsized sled, Hazel found blankets and a robe. Despite her now crippled hands, she placed two blankets on the floor. Following her instructions, Emmet and Myrdith lay down and curled together tightly. The wind snarled through an opening in the sled's canvas top, so Hazel tried to improvise a curtain. The snow fell incessantly.

Hazel roused herself. "Emmet! Myrdith!" she shouted. "You mustn't close your eyes. Punch each other! I'll count to a hundred. Make your legs go up and down as though you're running. Begin-one, two, three-" She could feel the small limbs moving underneath her. She tried to move her own; her brain instructed her legs, but she wasn't sure what they did. Next Hazel ordered, "Open and close your fingers one hundred times inside your mittens." They even tried singing.

"Let's pray to God to help us," suggested young Myrdith. "Now I lay me down to sleep," she began. But Hazel, who was doing everything she could to keep the children awake, interrupted, "No, Myrdith, not that one. Let's say 'Our Father' instead." Solemnly they chanted the Lord's Prayer.

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On into the timeless night Hazel directed them in exercises, stories, songs, prayers. And said to the two children over and over that they mustn't go to sleep.

Meanwhile the wind became a sixty-mile-an-hour gale, the temperature dropped well below freezing, and the gray became utter blackness. And the maddening snow kept falling. The searchers had to give up until daylight.

"At three o'clock on Tuesday afternoon, some twenty-four hours from the time the Miner children had disappeared, searchers spotted something in a pasture two miles south of the school. It was an overturned sleigh . . ." The searchers found the dead, frozen body of a fifteen-year-old girl outstretched covering her younger brother and sister . . . who were dazed and partially frozen, but alive.

Such an amazing story of courage, sacrifice and love! To give up your own life to ensure that others could live—is there any greater love than this? God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Such is the love that holds us, in our times of sorrow and suffering, loss and grief, loneliness and trouble, confusion and doubt . . . Such is the love that holds us, with the promise of a grace sufficient for our needs.

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In our Lenten journey, we draw ever closer to the cross. And as we gaze at the image of the crucified Christ, may we recall the depth of the love that is God's gift to us all. And may we, who have come to know that love through Jesus, be those who live that love in such a way that others may come to know it too.

Perhaps you've heard it said, Christ has no hands but ours ... With that in mind, let us make this our prayer:

*Jesus, you have no body on earth but ours,
No hands but ours, No feet but ours.*

*Ours are the eyes through which your compassion
must look out on the world.*

*Ours are the feet by which you may still
go about doing good.*

*Ours are the hands with which you bless people now.
Bless our minds and bodies,
that we may be a blessing to others. Amen.*