

## Fourth Sunday of Lent "B" – Part 12

We are just past the midpoint in Lent when we celebrate the fourth Sunday. This Sunday is called Laetare Sunday. This is a word in Latin meaning praise and rejoice. Rose-colored vestments, instead of the penitential purple color, may be worn on this Sunday. We praise God for his mercy and rejoice in God's grace and love as we near Holy Week and Easter. This Sunday is similar to Gaudete Sunday in Advent. This is a Latin word for rejoice. In the Advent season rose-colored vestments may be worn instead of purple as we rejoice that Christmas draws near.

The Gospel reading from John 3:14–21 contains the famous verse: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." There are so many purposes regarding Lent, but perhaps its main meaning is that it puts us in touch with just how deeply and radically we are loved. We pray, fast, and give alms, not to atone for sins, but to open us up to receive the love of God.

We are all unconditionally loved by God. God's love is not conditioned by our deeds – good or bad. God loves people in prison as much as he does the Pope. However, it is usually the Pope who receives God's love much more because he predisposes himself to God's love through prayer, reading, and other spiritual practices. Rest assured, no matter your past, God cares for you. Love is not just something God does; love is what God is.

Paul wrote to the church at Rome: "God shows his love for us while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8). It was not when we got our act together and went to church and started praying and fasting that God started loving us. We cannot "get" God to love us by our good works. Even though we are unworthy because we do not appreciate or reciprocate God's love, God still loves us. God was already in love with us even when we doubted or sinned. God's love is so strong that, even at the worst moments of our lives, God's affection for us is present. In the midst of addiction, mortal sin, and faithlessness, God still cares. "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast? Even if she could forget, I will not forget you, my people." (Isaiah 49:15).

Let this simple truth soak into your heart: God loves you. (1 John 4:8).

This intense, unending love is best shown by a crucifix. During Lent, especially, we focus on the cross of Jesus and his self-sacrificing love. Sacrifice means suffering, and God demonstrates his love for us by untold suffering. We make the sign of the cross when we pray, wear crucifixes around our necks, and put them on walls – not to be decorative but to remind us of the affection God has for us. Often, we become jaded towards God's love. We do not feel it, and lose touch with its cost and intensity.

The meaning of the Passion of Christ is simply this: God so loved us that he sent us his only son so that we could be saved from sin and death and be reborn to eternal life. St. Paul of the Cross, taught that everything could be found in the cross. When you reflect on its meaning, you will find forgiveness for your sins, mercy, and everlasting salvation. Paul of the Cross taught, that the cross is, the miracle of miracles and the most overwhelming work of God's love.

At the Good Friday liturgy, we process forward and kiss the crucifix. We venerate the cross because of Jesus' extreme sacrifice and because it is the great sign and symbol of God's love for us. We show our appreciation when we venerate the cross. During Lent, most make the stations of the cross. As we see Jesus condemned, fall three times, stripped of his clothes, and suffer intolerably, even the dullest of hearts realizes He went through those awful sufferings out of love for us.

The cross was an instrument of torture. It was designed to humiliate as well as make its victim suffer intolerably. A snapped stick was thrown at the feet of someone who was to be crucified because the upcoming torture would break him emotionally, as well as physically. Crucifixion was designed to extend a person's suffering. They would eventually die from asphyxiation, but not until they had suffered for long hours, if not days. Eventually their legs would be broken so they couldn't pull themselves up to breathe. Jesus endured intolerable torment out of love for us.

When we celebrate Mass, we are dynamically remembering God's love. The theological word for this is anamnesis. We remember so devoutly that we literally bring the sacrifice of the cross right into the present. We experience the efficacious, salvific effects of the cross in the here and now as we pray, remember, and receive communion. In the early Church, Mass was called an "agape feast." Agape is a Greek word referring to how God loves: unconditionally.

We do not go to Mass to get God to love us, but we sing, remember, celebrate, and pray to receive the agape love of God. We receive communion and the sacraments.

In the second reading, Ephesians 2:1–10, we hear about God's great love and inexplicable grace: "By grace we have been saved through faith, the gift of God." Grace can never be earned, merited, or deserved. Grace is a gift to be received. We receive grace through believing in God's goodness and the love God has for us. We receive grace by opening ourselves up to grace by praying and reading. Lent, while penitential, is most of all a season of getting in touch with grace.

Besides the love shown at the cross, God's love is demonstrated by the fact that God created us. Before the world began, he had us in mind. (Ephesians 1:4). Billions of years ago, he thought of us and in time called us into existence. There was not a thing that we could have done then to have God create you. It was out of the depths of his love that God envisioned us into being. Think of it. The one and only universe that God created with its eight billion people in it today, would not have been complete without us. God could have left us out. No one would have ever known. But out of love, God included everyone of us. We exist because God willed us into being. Every heartbeat, every thought, every moment is a gift from God to us.

The odds of us being born were some 1 in 400 trillion. In other words, the odds of us not being born are much higher than the odds of us coming to life. Psalm 139 states that we did not just happen to be through some luck of nature. It was not the universe and stardust that unintentionally spawned our birth. Rather, it was God who purposefully knit us together in our mother's womb. God created us on purpose for a purpose. Our purpose is to come to know God and share his love.

## You Are Loved

God loves all his creatures, he especially loves you. It is as if you are the only one who exists. You are unique, distinct, and rare. No one else, even if you have a twin, has your exact DNA, fingerprints, and iris recognition. No one has your individualized personality and way of reacting. Besides that, you have a unique individualized history unlike anyone else. God's love surrounds you; his hand is upon you, and every hair of your head is counted. Yes, God loves the eight billion people, but somehow in his greatness, God is able to focus specifically on you and loves you as you are.

We need to be reminded of God's love over and over again because, as we go about our day, we simply lose touch with this wonder. Once reminded, we can begin to see life anew and appreciate God's goodness. At morning prayer, those in religious life pray Psalm 136, which reminds them time and time again about God's love. This psalm recounts God's mighty deeds, always ending with God's love endures forever. 2

One major way we can experience God's love is through the Holy Spirit. Paul puts it this way: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Romans 5:5). The Holy Spirit is the beginning (Jesus is led into the desert), middle (now), and end of Lent (our preparation for Pentecost). Come to know and appreciate the Holy Spirit working in our lives more deeply during our Lenten journey.

It is through the Holy Spirit that we will experience God's love for us. As St. Paul of the Cross, counseled: "Immerse yourself in the sea of God's love. No matter how deeply you go, you will never reach bottom." God lavishes his Spirit upon us without ration. There is an unlimited, inexhaustible depth in God.

Once you taste and see God's goodness, an inner revolution begins. Instead of living with low self-esteem, a negative self image, and being paralyzed by fear, you begin to change. Since God is with you, you realize that all things are possible. You begin to grasp that you are a temple of God. Your new understanding of this fact, makes you realize your great potential and you begin to work to achieve it. You become daring, bold, and innovative. Risk and try new things. The Spirit comes to help you live with passion and realize your potential. It is God's love that changes us and re-creates us into all that we can be.

God's love is revealed in so many ways. God has created us, protected us, and provided for us. Every breath is a gift from God. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. God so much loved us that he was willing to give his only Son up to death. God has lavished his Spirit into our hearts and is in the process of re-creating us. These are some of the foundational ways God demonstrates his love for us.

You cannot make God love you any more than he already does. But you can receive God's love. The capacity of your heart to receive can expand. Simply believe in the great love God has for you. Give thanks for your blessings, and you will receive more and more of God's love. Try to notice God's love and appreciate blessings throughout your day. Go on a retreat and take trips to places of nature and soak in grace. Thoughtfully reflect on your mere existence, and you will become more aware of the affection God has for you. Invite the Holy Spirit to take control of your life and, in turn, you will taste and see God's goodness.

The journey of Lent is meant to put us in touch with this foundational truth: You are loved by God. Let us pray that we will receive: "The breath and length and height and depth of God's love that surpasses all knowledge." (Ephesians 3:18–19). This is why the priest wears pink on the fourth Sunday of Lent, let us rejoice.

Lenten Lessons:

- God's love is affectionate and unconditional
- God loves us personally and uniquely
- God created us and had us in mind from the beginning
- God's love is revealed in Jesus' sufferings on the cross
- We cannot earn God's love, but we can receive his goodness
- We are saved by God's inexplicable grace

Lenten Action:

- Become aware of one way you are loved now and give God thanks

