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God's love is a gift, not something to be earned

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

When we hear about God in today's Scriptures, I think in some ways we kind of accept it, but with reservation. We don't really believe in that kind of absolute gratuitous love. A couple of weeks ago, I was traveling back from someplace on an airplane and, sitting while I was coming home, it was in the evening, so I got out my prayer book and was beginning to pray some of the Psalms.

It was shortly before the plane landed, and when we landed, we got out into the aisle, and the gentleman next to me said, "What's the good word?" Now, I'd been reading -- he knew I'd been reading the Scriptures -- and I thought to myself, "Well, how can I summarize what I've been reading from the Psalms?" I said, "The word -- the good word -- is God loves us." And he said, "Yes, that's true. That's really it! God loves us; that's the good word."

Today, we hear that word in the most powerful way -- I think we do during the readings. "God loves us." It's a kind of love that St. John, in his first letter, says is what I mean by the love of God: Not that we love God, but that God first loves us. That's God's love. First God loves us, and that's so true in every one of the lessons today. In the first lesson from the Book of Exodus, in its way, that makes God seem very human, Moses has to kind of plead with God: "Don't destroy the people." God changes and doesn't; God loves them.

But then as you go on with the other lessons, it becomes even more powerful. St. Paul says, "I give thanks to Jesus who is my strength, who has considered me trustworthy and appointed me to his service, although I have been a blasphemer, a persecutor, an enemy. However, Jesus took mercy on me, and the grace of our Lord Jesus is more than abundant, together with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." See, Paul experienced that. He had been one who was persecuting the Christians when he was suddenly confronted with the image of Jesus -- the presence of Jesus -- and realized Jesus loved him, and Paul was

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14
Psalms 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19
The Whole of the Sunday
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totally changed.

Then, of course, in the Gospel, the message is absolutely powerful and clear, and it also becomes even more clearer because of the contrast. St. Luke is very careful to point out that Jesus was welcoming sinners; he even ate with them. Can you imagine? All of these terrible sinners, and Jesus says, "Come, share a meal with me." We don't even experience that fully in our church today, or at least we haven't been, where there's been this harsh pushing away.

Pope Francis, thank goodness, is changing some of that by going and eating meals with the poor and saying, "I don't make judgments about people, gay or lesbian, whatever. They're trying to love God; God loves them," and yet we haven't always been that way in the church, and there's still this idea that we have to earn God's love. That's the way the Pharisees felt, the scribes, the religious leaders: "You shouldn't be eating with sinners. Make them get converted first, then maybe they could come." But that's not Jesus.

So then to reinforce what he's doing, he tells these parables. The parables, each of them in an ever more powerful way, it seems, shows how almost absurd it is how God loves me. Because when you think about the shepherd, one sheep is lost, but the shepherd loves that one sheep so much and wants to reach out and pursue that sheep that the shepherd leaves the other 99. Total foolishness, isn't it? Because they're going to be endangered now, and yet the shepherd -- and God is showing us, in a sense, God's foolishness -- goes and looks for the one, is seeking the one who is lost.

That's how God loves us; he's seeking us, going after us, wanting to bring us back. The same way with the woman and the lost coin; she throws a celebration -- a supper, a great party -- probably spending more on the party than she lost in the coin. This kind of love is irrational, illogical, but it's the way God loves us. And the story of the two sons, we're so familiar with that, and yet when you really listen to it carefully, it's so powerful.

Yes, the son did squander everything, and he was totally destitute. He was reduced to working on a pig farm, which for a Jew was the greatest desecration possible. He was reduced to eating the food of pigs, and remember, pork was a forbidden food for Jewish people. So it was such a degradation that he was reduced to this because he had been such a loose liver, and yet what is happening?

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When he finally makes up his little speech and says, "I'm going to go back and apologize and try to get back in my father's good graces," the father's out there looking for him. How else did he notice when he's still a long way off? He was out there every day watching for him to come back, praying that he would come back, wanting to overflow love upon him. So then when the son comes back, that's what happens.

The father reaches out, draws in, loves when we're sinners -- not when we're good people, and that was the terrible mistake of the elder son. You know, in fact, he even used words; he says, "How all these years, I have slaved for you." He didn't think of himself as a loving son of a loving father. "I've been your slave. I earned," which is impossible. You can't earn the love of God; you can't earn any kind of love. Love is always a gift; we give it, we receive it. But in God's case, it's always God giving first, drawing us back.

So as we listen to these lessons today -- really try to absorb them -- we will understand that that is the good word: God loves us without limit, without our having to earn it, and forever; God never stops loving us. Once we experience that love, allow ourselves to understand -- and not just with our mind, but even to

somehow in our heart know God loves me -- then our response will be to love God with all of our hearts and mind and soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself. We'll begin to be people who spread love wherever we go, just as Jesus did.

Maybe as a final word for today, we can make our prayer what St. Paul says at the very end of the second lesson: "To the God of ages -- the only God who lives beyond every perishable and visible creation -- to that God, the honor and glory and love forever and ever. Amen."

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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