

Sermon for 4 Lent, Year B
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God loves us.

I say that, but I don't really expect anyone to hear it. Your minds take this piece of information, examine it, and file it as something you already know about. "Right, right, God loves us. OK, what else?" Even if you think that that's great, you're not really experiencing the reality of it in your gut. I know this about you, because I know it about myself. And I also know that even when we do get it into our guts, we don't get all of it. God is infinite, and God is love. And so that love is infinite. There is always more love from God for us to experience.

Let me give you an example. Adam and Eve rebel against God in the Garden. Does God just wipe them out and start over? No, he loves them. He is committed to working with them, even if they aren't committed to him. In the days of Noah, the human race is almost completely rebellious. Does God simply take Noah to himself, wipe out the race, and start over from scratch? No, he loves them. Even when he has to flood the entire earth, he keeps for himself one family to repopulate it. Do you see the pattern emerging, here?

The pattern continues throughout God's dealing with men. Abraham fails, Isaac fails, Jacob and Esau fail. God continues to work with them, and through them, and for them. And God's work through them is for our benefit and for the benefit of all mankind. He says to Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Jacob's sons fail, and yet he works for their salvation through their brother Joseph. Israel is enslaved, and yet he works for their salvation through Moses. They fail to respond properly to salvation, and yet he works through Moses and Joshua and others to bring their children into the land of promise. They fail to keep themselves from idols and pagan cults, and yet he works to bring them back. He works through judges and prophets, but they want a king. He finally gets the monarchy sorted out, and then the kings begin to multiply and increase the pagan abominations. God sends more prophets, and the kings get their own false prophets. God turns a few kings back to true worship of the Lord, but their sons always turn back.

And in our reading today, we finally get to the end of the history of the kingdom of Judah. "King Zedekiah and all the leading priests and the people were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the Lord, which the Lord had hallowed in Jerusalem." He keeps sending them prophets, but they won't listen to him. Finally, there is no remedy except to bring up that jerk, Nebuchadnezzar, and just make it stop.

And even then, God is saying, “I’m bringin’ ‘em back!” I’m telling you, God loves us! If I were God, it would have been game over for this crew long, long ago! And remember that we’re dealing here with the best of the litter. Our gentile ancestors were even worse. They were the ones dreaming up all the abominations God was trying to get rid of in Israel. Well, thanks be to God that I am not him. He is perfect love, and I am not. That doesn’t mean that his people don’t face judgment. But it does mean that he never gives up on them, and that he sees it as *his* job to fix it all. He loves us.

St. Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is part of this same pattern of God’s mercy and love. God loved us, he says, “even when we were dead through our transgressions”. Just as he has always done, God worked in us and for us before we could possibly have been worthy of his favor or even his attention. Even though we were dead, he “made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” God loves us!

Look, without Jesus, your life is death. If you don’t believe me, try it sometime. Maybe you’re trying it right now. Even the idiot pagans who write our TV programs know that life without love isn’t life. They just don’t want God to be the love they need. But none of us can earn love. How can a corpse earn love?

God chose to come into the world, and to become death for us, so that he could make us alive with and in him. And that is a free gift, given by grace to those of us who were dead. And then God gave us another free gift, the ability to trust him. None of this came out of us. It all came from him. God loves us!

So what will it look like if we actually take up the gift? What will it look like if we trust God to make us alive with Jesus? First of all, we will experience the presence of our Lord in our lives now. God has made us alive, raised us up, and seated us in the heavenly places. All the verbs St. Paul uses here have a little preposition attached to them: *syn*, with. It is as we are together with Jesus that these things occur. They are not things that are given to us, so that we can run off with them. They happen *with* him. In fact, we might say that they don’t happen principally to us at all, but only to Jesus. God’s gift to us is to make us members of the body of Christ, so that what happens to him happens to us who are *in* him.

Secondly, if we actually take up the gift of faith and trust God, we become his workmanship. We become clay in the potter’s hands. He is in the process of creating us, and the purpose of his creation is good works. Just as Jesus actively serves and does good to those around him, so we who are in him will serve and do good works to those around us. But we won’t do that by jumping off the potter’s wheel and shoving him off his bench. We will do that as the fruit of being patient under the loving attention of the potter, trusting him to draw us into the proper shape at the proper time. St. Paul tells us that God prepared the good works in

advance. He knows the shape he wants for us. We just have to trust him and obey him. He really does love us!

In today's Gospel, the love of God takes a tangible form. Jesus feeds the multitude. Not just enough to keep them alive to the next town, not just enough to take the edge off, not even just enough to satisfy. Everyone ate as much as they wanted, and there was enough left over to fill the disciples' lunch pails. It's the feast of Passover, so Jesus gives them a feast. And where do you think all that free food came from? From the miraculous love and grace of God, just like all salvation. Jesus is giving them himself. A little later he will say, "I am the bread of life," and "the bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh." But when they try to take him and make him do what they want, it doesn't work. He withdraws to the mountain by himself, and they are no longer with him.

At a later Passover meal, Jesus would do this again. And that time, he made it more explicit. He took the bread, and gave thanks for it, and broke it: "This is my body, which is given for you." And again he passed it out. That miraculous feeding is still going on. When you come up here later, you will be receiving the food that God in Jesus gives for the life of the world. You will receive his life into yourself, the spiritual food that keeps us *in* Christ, and makes us God's workmanship.

God loves us. He's already proven it over and over again, in the bible and in each of our lives. But he also proves it every week, as he offers himself to us as the food that we need to keep growing, the sustenance we need to keep waiting patiently under the potter's hands, the life we need to keep walking in the good works God has prepared for us.