SEEING OURSELVES IN A BETTER LIGHT –
A LIGHT FROM ABOVE

I recently spoke to a young friend at a party with her boyfriend whom I had never met before. Speaking to each of them separately in the course of the evening revealed to me once again the power of love. He’s the kindest man I’ve ever met, she said. I feel so wonderful when I’m with him; he brings out the best in me. A few minutes later, he echoed the same thing when he spoke about her: She’s so unselfish; when we share the events of our day she’s never self-focused. She talks about her young students – how they learned something new that day, the progress they made in their reading. She’s so dedicated and caring. She wants the best for her students, and for me. Love allows us to see each other in the best light possible. The good automatically rises to the surface.

Another couple had a similar experience. From the moment they met, he knew he was way out of her league. He worked hard - but his prospects weren’t what a woman of her background and education would find very promising. He found himself struggling to keep up with her. He had nothing to offer someone "like her." But that’s not what she saw. She was taken by his sense of humor and humility, his generosity of spirit, his ability to listen patiently and support unconditionally. His easy way with his family and friends, particularly his younger siblings, was a delight to watch. His integrity and common sense were so unlike the other guys she had known. Oh, she knew how much he had to offer - and she felt like the luckiest woman in the world when he worked up the courage to propose. Love brings out the best in us.

The Word of God given to us at this mid-point of Lent is a revelation of the love story God has with all of us and with the human race. It’s an ancient tale that began long ago. The Book of Chronicles tells us that early and often, did the God of our ancestors, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. Those prophets were like unsolicited pop-up ads on a computer screen, reminding the community about the covenant of love that they and God had entered into. Too often, the messengers were rejected along with their message. The Epistles, likewise, were love letters and Valentine cards that Paul and his disciples sent around to communities throughout the Mediterranean world. As he reminded the community at Ephesus: God, who is rich in
mercy, because of the great love he had for you, even when you were dead in your transgressions, brought you to life with Christ.... For you are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works....

And Jesus himself, as God’s very Word and spokesperson, delivered message after message to everyone he encountered that God’s deepest desire is to share with us his divine love: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.*

In his late-night conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus presents a very different picture of God - and of ourselves. Jesus reveals to Nicodemus a God of life and restoration, a God who seeks not our punishment or humiliation, but our healing and reconciliation with him and with one another. The God Jesus reveals is not the God of condemnation and destruction but the God of forgiveness, mercy and compassion. And that should help us re-imagine ourselves: that, created in God’s love, we are more than the superficialities of appearance and assets, of wit and social graces.

In the light of his Christ, we come to realize the good in ourselves that we often don’t see. In that light, we find joy and reason to be grateful for the good that others bring to our lives. As Jesus explains to Nicodemus, God has created us as an extension of himself: from the moment of our creation, his life and love are part of our very being. In our embracing of his Spirit of justice and mercy, in our work to re-make our world in his dream of compassion and peace, the love in which we were created transforms our lives and the lives of those we love and who love us into the very light and love of God.

For us who believe in the gospel of Jesus and who follow the path of penance during this Lenten season, the divine love story reveals itself even more forcefully in the cross of Christ. We can never say that God willed the death of Jesus. God’s ultimate will is always to heal, never to destroy. Certainly, it seems blasphemous to picture God as wanting Jesus tortured and killed as if to “pay off” some debt to Satan, or to cancel the debt for our human sins. It seems contradictory for a good God to “will” in any direct way that Jesus undergo such a horrible death. What then should we say God willed regarding Jesus’ death? Can we not say that God willed Jesus to be a whole, honest, loving human being -- a model for humanity -- a person who would serve others totally, especially those in need, setting people free from all oppression? The price, however, of being a completely just and loving person in an unjust and imperfect world, and of confronting the world’s sin could well be suffering and death.
Isn’t this the same kind of sacrificial love that marks so much of your own lives as parents and husbands and wives, as neighbors and friends, as parishioners? In your desire to share the fullness of life with your partner, with your co-workers and with your children, you are willing to sacrifice your own good, to look beyond your own needs and to give even your life’s blood for those you love. Our children and teenagers who strive to do their best make a sacrificial effort every day because they know they need to work to build a better world than what they have inherited. Young adults who face the challenge of balancing the conflicting values in our materialistic society know what it means to make difficult choices in order to live with integrity.

For us who believe, the cross is not an oddity or anomaly; it’s a way of life -- a way in which you share every day. In order to accomplish anything of worth and value, of goodness and beauty, we not only sacrifice, we choose to endure whatever sufferings are inherent and demanded by love. The most we can say of Jesus’ death on the cross is that God allowed him to suffer, or perhaps that God willed Jesus to enter the full range of human experience, which included pain, frustration and death, as well as joy and exhilaration. But it’s misleading to say that God wanted Jesus to suffer -- just as it’s misleading to suggest that God wishes evil on any human being. People have always struggled to find meaning in suffering. Our belief in the saving power of Christ’s death and resurrection can be a helpful means for us to understand our own struggles and to be a compassionate presence to others who suffer.

In this Eucharist we can know the nearness of a caring God. We can look more kindly upon ourselves and others, for we believe with St. John that God sent his Son, not to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved. We can find in the example of Jesus the courage to stand our own trials with hope, to share in the sacrifice of Christ by bearing our everyday challenges and crosses with love, and to know in our hearts that nothing ultimately can separate us from the love of God made visible in Christ. We can sing with greater conviction: There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in You, O God.

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