

God's Love is Unconditional and It's a Gift

In my first assignment at St. Peter in Lorain, I was invited to a parishioner's home for a holiday gathering. The couple's married daughter, her husband and their two young children were also present. The children, Sarah about three, and Ben, five or six, took no end of delight in showing Fr. Lou the gifts they had received that Christmas: Ben was especially proud of his catcher's mitt and Sarah kept returning with her new doll.

Well, you know how children are when wound up with holiday energy. So in an effort to gently calm them down, I said, "Ben, Sarah, you must have been really good to have gotten all those wonderful gifts. Their father who was sitting beside me on the sofa leaned over and whispered, "They got the gifts because they're loved."

Now wouldn't you love to put a priest in his place like that! Frankly, though just recently ordained, I was approaching fifty, so I should have known better. But like so many in our contemporary culture, I let the prevailing values overtake me:

*You better watch out,
You better not cry,
You better not pout,
I'm telling you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town!
He's making a list,
And checking it twice,
Gonna find out who's naughty or nice.*

.....

*He sees you when you're sleeping,
He knows when you're awake.
He knows when you've been bad or good,
So be good for goodness sake!*

Really? I'm not a parent, so I won't argue the value of particular methods of discipline, but as a disciple of Jesus who really screwed up that Christmas season years ago, that experience reshaped my spirituality and my preaching. God's love is unconditional and it's a gift. Intellectually, I knew that. That's what that young father was teaching his two beautiful children. He wanted that significant moment in their lives to be a teachable moment. I think they learned it; I know I did.

What we as Christians celebrate this day—what we celebrate every time we gather here—is the boundless, unconditional, irrevocable love of God. Though we begin these celebrations by recalling our failure to respond to that love, what we do here is to say THANKS! The word Eucharist means “thanksgiving.” In this celebration of thanks we acknowledge that we can never, ever earn God’s love. So all we can do is say thank you.

What this particular feast is about is the most wonderful demonstration of that love: our God embracing our human condition. He did that to show us how to say thanks:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

And the two commandments that sum it all up:

Love God and love one another as I have loved you.

I’ve come to understand that this is the most difficult part of being a disciple of Jesus. Oh, I have no problem with loving God. It’s loving others as God loves me that is the real

challenge of discipleship. And what short-circuits that challenge goes beyond a simple ditty about Santa Claus coming to town. How do we love others as God has loved us in such a polarized, divisive world?

Jesus showed us how. He told us to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute us. Those are tall orders. So maybe we should start small: loving that person down the street who really irks me, or the obnoxious guy at work.

Putting bluntly: we have to get over Christmas! We have to move beyond Bethlehem; we need to willingly move to that deserted place where Jesus challenged his disciples to feed more than five thousand people themselves. We need to follow Jesus who refused to judge a woman caught in adultery, who touched a leper, who raised up a bent over woman, and forgave a thief on a cross. We need to listen to the one born in Bethlehem as he told stories of Good Samaritans and Prodigal Sons.

What Bethlehem, full of angel choirs and venerating shepherds, is about is only the beginning of the story. That story leads to challenges that offer each one of us daily opportunities to say thank you: thank you for life, thank you for the beauty of creation, thank you for everything we have, thank you for everything we are. If only you and I understood what that young father was teaching his children. We didn't earn it. It's because we're loved.

Now let's give thanks! And really start loving as God loves us!