

## **18th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Our readings this week are filled with insight into God's grace. Grace means free gift. That's what God is. One of the great spiritual truths is that God does not need us. It's true. God is God, utterly perfect. Creation itself adds nothing to what God already has. Our moral excellence does not add to God. Our moral turpitude does not take away from God. And, believe it or not, this is incomparably good news. For it means that God can fully love us; lavish us with a totally un-self-interested grace.

Even our best acts, even our most selfless acts, still usually have a little touch of self-regard in them. It is because we are needy and incomplete. But God needs nothing and therefore He can be utterly graceful and loving to us.

The bottom line is this: God wants us to be fully alive--He wants to share His divine life with us. God wants all people to be saved and therefore He can say through the prophet Isaiah from our first reading: ***"All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; Come without paying and without cost...."***

It is very interesting to reflect on this. We so readily become locked into economic and calculating relationships with one another. What do I mean by this? We have become use to relating to each other with such notions as: You scratch my back and I scratch yours; You do me a favor and I do one for you in return. We make contractual agreements with each other and try to live up to the conditions. Or conversely, you hurt me, I hurt you back. You insult me, I hold a grudge. You renege on your contract, I'll take you to court; an eye for an eye; violence answering violence, and because we live in this way in regard to each other, with calculating precision, quid pro quo, this for that, we very easily transfer this dynamic over to our relationship with God.

And when we do this, the wheels fall off the cart and everything goes off kilter, because, again, God needs nothing. There is nothing that God gains from us. As I already said, our moral goodness adds nothing to God and our moral turpitude subtracts nothing from God.

What always comes first in the spiritual life is grace--the free gift of God's love; the free gift of God's self. When games of calculation, earning, deserving, fulfilling of the law come first--God's program becomes skewed and disrupted.

St. Paul in our second reading expresses this great spiritual truth: ***"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God...."***

We all need to meditate on this passage. It's from the 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. It's one of the most powerful statements of faith in all the New Testament.

This is a statement confirming that God is indeed grace and gracious, and that nothing in this world can separate us from that grace.

In our ordinary relationships we tend to negotiate in a contractual way and as such all sorts of things can separate us from the love and the good will of the other person: our failure, their failure; our incompetence and foolishness; our mutual arrogance, unforeseen developments; our death, or their death. With such a contractual way of dealing with each other, such things could get in the way of it.

But not so with God, when we stand in a relationship of grace--real grace--nothing can separate us from it. How about our own sin? God's love is greater than our own sin. Our moral failure--God's love is greater than our moral failure. Our rebellion, God's love is greater than our rebellion. The good news of the Gospel is that none of this can separate us from God, for His love and His grace can always overcome it.

Can we, in the end, turn away from even this grace? Yes! That's called mortal sin! Does this mean that God is cruel and capricious? No! God is grace straight through till the end. We, in our freedom, can say **no**--even to such a gracious gift as grace. But from God's side, nothing can separate us.

How does Paul know this? We know it from the little tag he puts at the end, **"the love that comes to us from Christ Jesus our Lord."** Paul knows--even more fully than Isaiah did--that nothing can separate us from God's love because Paul knows that we killed God and God returned to us in forgiving love.

The cross meant so much more than the death of an aspiring social activist--much more than the tragic death of a religious figure. The cross of Jesus is the world, in its sin, putting to death God's offer of grace. But Jesus on the third day rose from the dead--manifesting to us thereby that God's love is more powerful than the greatest sin, which is putting to death the grace of God.

And that is how St. Paul knows, and is convinced, that nothing can finally separate us from this love.

Now, you might be wondering, doesn't this lead us to a kind of quietism, or passivity, or an "anything goes" attitude? Do whatever you want, God loves you. Well, frankly **no**, it doesn't mean that at all. We get these questions answered in the Gospel, in that great story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

The disciples come to the Lord and say we have all these people, we can't possibly feed them--send them away. Jesus responds with: ***Give them some food yourselves.***"

When you live in relation to God's grace, God's gift of self, you become conformed to it. You become a conduit of it. You give what you have received. And here's the greatest wonder of all--you will find it multiplied within you beyond your wildest imagining.

You've received grace, now you become grace yourself. The more you give away that life of God that is within you, the more you will receive it. And before you know it, you will find...YES...even your simplest acts of love become food for the feeding of the world.

We see this in the lives of the saints, over and over again, people conformed to God's grace do **not** become passive, quiet, or adopt an "anything goes attitude." The more you open your heart and soul to God's grace, the more you want to give it and live it. And so the more you give it and live it, the more it multiplies within you. Your life is so enhanced that you are compelled to feed those around you in corporal and spiritual acts of love. You are conformed to the life of Christ within you, doing only the will of the Father in all that you say and do.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella