

God So Loved the World  
03/11/18

Maybe you recognized the verse from the Gospel, maybe you didn't. Used to be at virtually every sporting event or any major gathering, there would be signs that simply referenced the verse, though I haven't seen them in a while. John 3:16. That's all the sign would say. John 3:16. That was the third verse we heard in today's Gospel passage.

"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." One author suggests that if we include John 3:17, the two of them together sum up the entire Gospel. "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." And I guess I agree with the author, since Jesus always preached about love and what better way to preach love than to give up one's life?

Fr. Bob Duggan relates a story about a woman named Andrea. It seems she had done everything her parents had warned her against and had lied to cover it up. But it's impossible to keep a secret in a small town, so she stopped talking to them. When they continued "nagging" her she moved out "forever", telling her parents she "didn't have a family anymore."

Eight months later, broke and lonely, she chanced to see her father on the street. Certain he would condemn her, she turned away – too late. "Hello, Andrea. How have you been?" Andrea could not contain her tears when she heard the words, "Sweetheart, your mom and I would love to have you come home."

That story reminded me about another prodigal child, the one about a man and his two sons. This story has a similar ending, in that the father welcomed his daughter back, despite what she had done and said. He wanted her to know that she was loved and would always be loved. And that's exactly how it is with our loving and merciful God.

Over and over and over the Israelites broke the Covenant that had been established between them and God and over and over and over, God kept welcoming them back. Why? The answer is simple: if God wants to show us how to love, He has no choice – His love has to be unconditional. As one author puts it, no amount of infidelity or abomination was sufficient to discourage the God who chooses to inhabit the same space as those who were created in the divine image.

That's exactly what Paul is telling the Ephesians. We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them. Think about that statement for just a minute. We are God's handiwork. It's at once awesome and scary. And we don't have to do anything to earn God's love – it's a free gift.

Yet, as Msgr. Ralph Kuehner suggests, sometimes we find ourselves unwittingly slipping into the thinking that if we do all the right things, when we die we'll go to heaven and God will have to take us in. If we say the right prayers and belong to the right religion and follow all the rules and believe all the right truths, we will have earned salvation.

Kuehner goes on to remind us that the problem with that line of thinking is that we will have saved ourselves and there will have been no need for God's gracious goodness. We will have been lifted up by ourselves and not by Jesus Christ. We will have proclaimed ourselves as the light to overcome darkness, and it will not have been the death and resurrection of Jesus that did so.

Let me finish with some thoughts from Dennis Sylva. He says we become what we behold. If we grow up seeing goodness and kindness and mercy and forgiveness, we shall become that. But if we grow up seeing anger and hatred and selfishness and a refusal to forgive others, that will leave its mark on us. The old belief was that what a person saw was stamped indelibly on the soul. What does your stamp look like?