

# It's Grace . . .

When I was working in a chemical dependency treatment center years ago a young man shared his shame at never measuring up to what he believed his father expected of him. "If I could only please him," he said, "then he would love me." I asked if he believed that on the day he was born his dad cradled him in his arms and said, "Son, if you do.....then I'll love you?" The young man recognized the absurdity of my question and nodded as I said, "Love is a gift. It can't be earned."

One of my favorite spiritual authors, Brennan Manning captured this in his final book, "All Is Grace" which chronicles his descents into alcoholism, his failures as a priest, and follower of Jesus. In both his successes and lapses, he recognized that God loved him as he was and that love enabled him to change and love in return.

Despite all the times in Scripture that Jesus and the prophets tell us that love is freely given and that it's not about what we do we still have a tendency to want to perform so that God will find us pleasing and love us. We know in our spirits that this is a lie but our minds have a lot of catching up to do. This is especially true for some of us during Lent when we tend to multiply our prayers and sacrifices. If these are combined with change of heart and growing awareness of God's abundant love for us they are beneficial, but externals alone do little.

I challenge you to sit for a moment with Hosea 6:6: *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.* Uncomfortable isn't it for those doers among us (myself included)? It seems too simple and paradoxically, that's why it is so hard.

The goal of this focused time of Lenten awareness, it seems to me, is to more deeply awaken us to God's love for us and to let this love overflow in the way we love others. As the first letter of John reminds us, *"We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. We love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:16, 19)*

God continues to invite us into an ever deepening relationship. "Come back to me with all your heart. Don't let fear keep us apart...Long have I waited for your coming home to me and

living deeply our new love"—these are the words of one of my favorite Lenten songs. And I believe that is how God interacts with us.

*"For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me."* (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

God is a persistent lover who keeps luring us into deeper and deeper relationship. And this allure continues every day of our lives.

My one grandson was explaining that he loved me "so much" (arms outstretched) but "I'll love you more when I get older." His twin brother told his mom recently that he'd have to have "arms as long as Professor Gadget's" to wrap around his mother to show her how much he loves her. Even at the age of 5 they seem to understand that love continues to deepen and grow as long as we live.

Relationships with grandchildren, family, and friends take time to nurture. I think it's the same with God. Jesus gives us tips on how to do this: *"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen... And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ...When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting."* (Matthew 6:6, 16)

The main thing we have to do is show up—it's as simple as that—no spiritual boot camp—just the desire to be there. God does the rest. It's love gift from God to us. St. Paul reminds us: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast..."* (Ephesians 2: 9, 10)

God's love is gift—pure grace. There is no possible way we can earn it. So this Lent let's allow God to do the work. What we do might look the same, but I'm guessing that we'll experience a new freedom and peace and intimacy\ in the process. And we just might experience God cradling us like jubilant new parents and whispering, "I love you. I'm so in love with you."

— Angela Anno

*For I know the  
Plans  
I have for you,  
DECLARES THE LORD  
Plans for  
Hope and a Future.  
Jer. 29:11*



*"In the poor and outcast we see Christ's face; by loving and helping the poor, we love and serve Christ. Our efforts are also directed to ending violations of human dignity, discrimination and abuse in the world, for these are so often the cause of destitution. When power, luxury and money become idols, they take priority over the need for a fair distribution of wealth. Our consciences thus need to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing."*

—Pope Francis