

# ***“God Loved the World...” or Love, Faith, & Works***

4 Lent—Sunday, March 22, 2009

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## **I. “God so loved the world...”**

In the Gospel for today we heard that *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”* Could you sacrifice your only child if that act ushers in a new time? If that act would save the world? If that act would initiate the possibility of heaven on earth? If that act united humanity in peace as God’s children?

My daughter is now 19 and is beautiful and flourishing. Could I make her do my will? There is no way in heaven or on earth. She is definitely her own person, and yet, in a fundamental way, she is I, I am she. I love her as I love myself, and fortunately—or unfortunately—I see myself in her. I celebrate when she celebrates, I mourn when she mourns. I could not ask her to go to Iraq or Afghanistan to rid the world of terrorists, for she may die, and that possibility devastates my heart.

Therefore, I know that God’s sacrifice, in sending his Son into human flesh—to teach, to heal, to suffer, and to die—is the ultimate act of love for his creation. God’s act 2,000 years ago, and his movement in us and about us every day through the continuing presence of Christ, exhibits a limitless love that, ultimately, overcomes all evil. My faith is in the presence of God’s unconditional love for all.

## **II. An Experience of Faith**

In the Letter to the Hebrews, Paul wrote, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”*

When I was eight years old, my mother—who is nominally Episcopalian—one Sunday took me to All Saints by the Sea Episcopal Church in Montecito, California. Yes, I had been baptized at six months and remember attending Easter and Christmas services occasionally before that time, but this was just one Sunday in Pentecost. After the service, she asked me, *“Do you want to come back? Because, if you don’t, I won’t.”* I don’t understand, even now, my response, but at that moment I spoke from my heart, *“Yes.”* Faith, after all, passes understanding.

From that moment, I sang in the choir, and, when my voice changed, I served as acolyte and crucifer. When I sang and when I served, it was simply an act of devotion to my heart’s experience of a presence that regarded me with joy. I confess I never cared much for the words of the lectionary or the sermon. I cared even less for the many words spoken in Sunday School which I rarely attended because I served in the choir or at the altar instead. All those

words seemed so contrary to that bright presence. What held me fast was the presence of unconditional love I served in the liturgy, my heart's "*conviction of things unseen*".

I did not learn that faith; it was already there in the "Yes" my heart spoke. I cannot explain its why's or wherefores. I still do not believe they matter much except perhaps in sharing my faith with those who may not have the heart's understanding.

And later, in my twenties, I felt a call to the ministry, but not to preaching. I was called to serve God in the church, yes, but talking about faith from a pulpit was not what I ever discerned as a part my set of gifts and skills. Yet, of course, preaching is a primary aspect of church ministry. So I applied myself and have been speaking from pulpits, sometimes effectively, to that same presence of God in the people. I hope always to convey the heart's understanding of the presence that regards us here in the church on Sunday morning with the greatest possible joy and love.

### **III. Pauline Theology I: Christ Changes Everything**

And now that I have discerned my faith more deeply, I resonate with the Pauline theology that sees the gift of Christ in history and in our hearts as changing the very fabric of our lives. Both creation itself and history are forever transformed by the incarnation. We are no longer bound in a relationship like that between the Jewish people and Yahweh. God no longer promises to be faithful to us *IF* we are faithful to God. The Israelites had a conditioned relationship with God; they were under the Law. So long as they followed his commandments, they would live blessed in land that runs with milk and honey. We, on the other hand, are all—Jews and Gentiles alike—recipients of the greatest gift of all, God's love in Christ, whose sacrifice in suffering, death and resurrection mysteriously changes everything. This gift is God's ultimate act of love for his creation, a love that embraces all the teeming billions of humans now on earth.

### **IV. Pauline Theology II: Works & "Original Blessing"**

Yet, I have to confess, the twin Pauline notion that we are inherently sinners and that only faith in God's boundless grace justifies us and finally saves us from the original sin knit into our very bones bothers me. Despite most human behavior, the greed and the violence all around us, people, I believe, are essentially good. Our "*fallen nature*" does not settle well in my heart's faith. Augustine expressed this Pauline notion well when he wrote in his *Confessions*, "*I have no hope at all but in his great mercy. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt.*" Augustine, famously, knew he could not live God's commands, specifically to live in continence as a priest without God's grace.

A monk named Pelagius also lived in the fourth century. He came from Ireland and settled first in Rome and then in Carthage where, specifically because of Augustine's saying, "*Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt,*" he saw a moral laxity in the Church of Rome. They say he denied original sin, but I think he simply affirmed the goodness of creation and the possibility inherent in people because we are made in the image of God. As a result, he ran afoul of Bishop Augustine and was condemned as a heretic.

I think Pelagius was a precursor of Matthew Fox, who was similarly excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Fox is now an Anglican who continues to preach "*original blessing*" instead of original sin.

Paul himself had his own critics in the faith versus works debate. In the letter attributed to James, the brother of Jesus writes, "*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*"

Each of us can do the little we can do, in reaching for God's presence and in service others in need. When we take one small step towards God, God takes a million steps towards us. We can come to church, serve our brothers and sisters in our parish and those who come who are hungry, poor and heavy laden. After all, Jesus said, "*Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me,*" and "*You will be known by your fruits.*"

## **V. Conclusion: A Mature Faith**

My hearts faith was a child's faith, simple, without complicated theology. Jesus did say, after all, that those who are like children would enter the Kingdom of God. Faith is mature, however, when we **follow** Christ, take up his cross, serve our fellows in need, and respect the goodness, the original blessing, of creation. God's gifts of Christ and the Holy Spirit interfuse all, and therefore all is uplifted, if we only have eyes to see, ears to hear, a heart that understands. The presence I felt so sweetly as a child, regards us all with boundless and unconditional joy, but we truly open our hearts to God when we embrace creation. When we open our hearts wide in faith, we will know that God's sacrifice of his only Son will bear its ultimate fruit, in uniting heaven and earth. We will participate in the ongoing work of Christ, God's Word, which was in the beginning with God and even now creates. We will know that all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well as we come together, Sunday after Sunday, in the love of Christ. For, "*Christ so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*"

Amen.