

[Spirituality](#)



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by Thomas Gumbleton

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We begin today this second half of Lent, beginning of the fourth week. Many of us, I think and rightly so, have a sense of Lent of being kind of a penitential season, a season where we're looking at what's wrong with ourselves and trying to reform, trying to become better. It can be kind of a discouraging season. But if we listen to the second lesson today, we might get a totally different idea about Lent and what we are preparing to celebrate in our baptism, which is what we celebrate with the resurrection of Jesus at Easter.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

[March 11, 2018](#)

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Psalms 137

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21

St. Paul, in writing to the church at Ephesus, tells the people there, "But God, who is rich in mercy, revealed God's immense love, as we were dead through our sins, God gave us life with Christ. By grace we have been saved and God raised us to life with Christ, giving us a place with Christ in heaven. In showing us such kindness in Christ Jesus, God willed to reveal and unfold in the coming ages the extraordinary riches of God's grace."

I guess we might understand, if we think about it for a moment, why St. Paul would be so firm in this conviction that God is rich in mercy. Remember, Paul had been a persecutor of the Christians; he hated Christians, and he wanted to rid the world of Christians. But God came to him in a mysterious way and called him to be one of his greatest disciples, one who would proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to the nations, to all the Gentile peoples. So Paul really understood this gift of mercy and how God is a God of mercy and love.

If we listen to our first lesson today, we too will see how God is a God of mercy, a God of love, and is preparing for us to receive a renewed special gift of that love at

Easter. That first lesson would have been the very last book in the Old Testament, the historical books. It was a book where it ended with the chronicler, the one who wrote the book, describing how the chosen people had abandoned their faith in God. It's like a public confession of the sins of the people.

This is what the chronicler says, "All the heads of the priesthood and the people too were exceedingly unfaithful, following the disgusting example of the Gentiles around them." So they defiled the house, the house of God, the house God himself had made holy. The chronicler goes on: "They mocked the messengers of God, the prophets. They ignored their words, laughed at the prophets until at last, the anger of God rose so high against God's people there was no further remedy."

Then he goes on, as you heard in the lesson, to explain how for 70 years the people were in exile. They had been defeated by their enemies, carried off into exile in Babylon 70 long years. But then again, God's mercy breaks forth. "In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, to fulfill what God had said through the prophet Jeremiah, God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia to issue the following command: 'Thus speaks Cyrus, king of Persia: God the God of heaven, who has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, has ordered me to build a house in Jerusalem, in Judah. Now all of you who belong to God's people, go there and may your God be with you.'"

How amazing is this act of mercy on the part of God. The chronicler has merely their sinfulness, come before God in humility and with the spirit of contrition, and proclaimed the needs of the people to be forgiven. Immediately, God works in fact through a pagan ruler, Cyrus the king of Persia, and brings the people back to the Promised Land so they could rebuild their temple, reestablish their religious life, reestablish the temple, and reestablish themselves as God's chosen people in the Promised Land.

It was a total gift on the part of God, God's mercy breaking forth in bringing the people back. As we've heard before, it's recorded in the First Letter of John: "God is love." This is what is being shown: God is love; where there is love, there is God. Then in that letter of John, he emphasizes: "And this is what I mean: that God first loved us." It's always true that God has loved us into being, into existence. God loves us by God's forgiveness and God's graciousness to us. Even when we have failed, God is always waiting to forgive, to be gracious, to show forth love for us once we make that turn back to God.

Again, this is what we hear in the Gospel lesson where Jesus, in instructing Nicodemus, reminds us that God so loved the world — that means all of creation, all peoples, of all times. God's only relationship to us is love. God so loved the world that God gave Jesus, God's only Son, to be part of our human family, to be one of us, to be a light for us, to show us the way, to bring God's forgiveness, God's kindness, God's love, God's goodness to each one of us.

It's an amazing relationship — God loving us, loving us first, bringing us back when we fail, showing us that love over and over again. God did not send Jesus, John in the Gospel tells us, into the world to condemn the world. Instead, through Jesus, the world and all of creation — every person — is to be filled with the saving love of God. That's what the promise is being held out before us in this gift of Jesus, that we too can share in the saving love of God.

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In today's liturgy, I hope we perhaps take the time (not necessarily during this liturgy, but during this coming week) to review our own failures, but not with a sense of diminishing ourselves or destroying ourselves through self-contempt or anything of the sort, but only to be honest before God, and to be ready then for God, who is waiting to be gracious to us to forgive us, help us to experience God's love. As we do that this week, and then the next two weeks, so then after that we will be ready on Easter to experience a new fullness of that love of God within our hearts as we celebrate the fact that Jesus breaks the bonds of death, destroys death, overcomes evil through love, and brings that life and that love to each one of us as we share through our baptism in his risen life.

One way, it seems to me, that we can prepare for a deeper experience of God's love for us is to remind ourselves that our response to this gracious love of God must be our gratitude to God, but also as Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper, "There is just one commandment that I leave with you: (Jesus has shown them his love abundantly.) Love one another as I have loved you." They will experience how Jesus loves them when he pours forth his love from the cross and brings love where there is hatred, brings love where there is violence, brings forgiveness where there is evil.

Jesus shows us how we must love one another to respond to that gift of love that God shares first with us. It's a very challenging thing to love one another as Jesus

commands us because Jesus tells us, "Greater love than this no one has than to lay down one's life for a brother or sister." Does Jesus really expect us to love one another in such a way that we would indeed lay down our life out of love? He did it for us: "Love one another as I have loved you."

We might think that's impossible, but I came across this description of what happened in that terrible massacre in Florida a couple of weeks ago. I had not read this before. Here's an example of someone willing to lay down his life for his brothers and sisters:

When a gunman rampaged through a high school in Parkland, Florida ... a 15-year-old soccer player named Anthony Borges showed undaunted courage. Anthony, who is of Venezuelan descent, apparently was the last of a group of students rushing into a classroom to seek refuge. He shut the door behind him and frantically tried to lock it, but in an instant the gunman appeared on the other side. Instead of running for cover, Anthony blocked the door to keep the shooter out. He held his ground even as the attacker opened fire. "I asked him why he would do that," his lawyer ... told me. "He said, 'What's so hard to understand about what I did?' He had no issue with risking his life."

Shot five times in the legs and torso, Anthony phoned his father to say he had been wounded. He was rushed to a hospital and survived: Photos show him with wires and tubes snaking from him. He still can't walk — it's unclear if that is just temporary — but fellow students say he saved their lives. No one else in that classroom was shot. The world turned upside down: Armed law enforcement officers dawdled outside during the shooting, but a 15-year-old kid without any weapon at all used himself as a human shield to protect his classmates.

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He was willing to lay down his life for his brothers and sisters, to love as Jesus loved. You and I are not going to be asked probably to do any such thing so dramatic. But aren't there a lot of ways in which we could improve on showing our love to one another in our daily life, in our families, our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, our community, our country and try to influence our country to be a beacon of light and love in the world to bring peace, to bring love, forgiveness.

There are many ways in which each of us can do that. Ultimately, if it were ever asked of us, we could be as Anthony Borges was — willing to give our life for another, the kind of love that Jesus offers to us, the kind of love that we have received from God by God calling us into existence in the beginning, the kind of love that God pours forth upon us every day. God loves us. God is a God of mercy, a God of love.

Jesus asks us, and I hope during these last three weeks of Lent we pray about how we — each of us — can be more genuine and faithful in loving one another, forgiving one another, bringing reconciliation wherever we go and in whatever situations we're engaged in. I guess finally, I pray that somehow out of the attempt that President [Donald] Trump is now making to bring reconciliation with North Korea, that our nation will imitate the way of Jesus and through reconciliation, bring the hope for peace in our world to be a reality. This is our program for the rest of Lent: Love one another as God through Jesus has loved us.

[Homily given March 10, 2018, at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]