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## THE GIFT OF LOVE

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he story is told of an American Indian tribe whose customs included a challenging rite of passage for its young men. They were considered children until age twelve, at which time they were expected to graduate to manhood. All their early training and instruction was aimed at preparing them for the day when they would leave childhood behind forever and become men.

The whole process culminated in a single night of ceremony and testing, after which they were accepted as braves of the tribe. The ceremony itself was awe-inspiring: the elders of the tribe, surrounded by all the rest of the men, were seated in solemn assembly to usher the young men into adulthood. The fires, the drums, the dancing, the ritual. Most of all, the anticipation of the ordeal to come and the question pounding away deep inside each boy's heart: *Am I good enough? Will I make it?*

Finally the rituals were completed and the time came for the climactic test. Each young boy was led away into the darkness with nothing but a knife and the clothes on his back to spend the night in the deep of the forest, alone.

Let's focus on the experience of just one of these young boys. Like all the others, he had strained and agonized through the years of stern instruction and training. He had sat mesmerized before the fire that evening, watching the men of the tribe perform the rituals so old and familiar to them but so strange and new to him, who had never before been permitted to witness them.

Now he stood alone, in the deep darkness of the woods, clutching his hunting knife in his hand and listening to the pounding of his heart that seemed to drown out the familiar noises of the night.

No doubt you yourself know what it is like to be left all alone in a dark and strange place. Shapes take on weird, wild proportions in the moonlight. Noises seem magnified and ominous. Your imagination runs away with the slightest disturbance, creating visions of danger.

He could not possibly sleep. The shapes and sounds were too ominous, the possibilities of danger too frightening, the consequences of failing to endure the test too humiliating even to contemplate. He groped his way to a large, sturdy tree. Knife still clutched tightly in hand, he stood with his back to the tree so that he would have to defend himself in only three directions. There he planted himself, watching the shapes and shadows and listening to the sounds of the dark night.

After what seemed like half a lifetime had passed, the boy noticed that the darkness was starting to melt away. Soon one side of the sky was growing lighter, and in the rosy hues of sunrise he could begin to see his surroundings more clearly. Rocks and trees and bushes that had frightened him during the night began to take back their normal proportions and become themselves again. Now his heart began to pound even harder, not with fear this time but with jubilation mixed with inexpressible relief. It was over. He had made it.

For the first time in hours, he felt his muscles begin to relax and his breathing return to normal. With the coming of the sun he was free to return to the village.

He had taken only a few steps from the tree that had been his protector through the long night when he heard the snapping of a twig a few yards behind him. His heart leapt to his throat as he wheeled around and raised his knife to the ready. There, atop a large rock just behind the tree, silhouetted against the morning sky, stood a man. He was dressed in warrior's garb and he held a bow and arrow trained on the boy's chest. Slowly, slowly, he lowered the bow to his side, slipped down the back side of the rock, and stole away into the forest.

The boy stood silently, catching his breath. He understood instantly what had happened. Had the warrior wished to remain unseen and unheard, he could easily have done so. But he had made the small noise on purpose, had meant for the boy to see him. And he had meant for the boy to recognize him. As the warrior had lowered his bow to his side, just before he turned and disappeared into the woods, the boy had caught a glimpse of his face. It was his father. He had been standing there, watching over him all night, ready to spring to his rescue if needed. His father had been there all along.

### *God Is Always With Us*

The first time I heard that story I thought to myself, "That's exactly how it is with us and our heavenly Father. He allows us to go through many trials and hardships, many fearful moments. He wants us to be brave, to stand firm, to endure, even to fight if need be, because he wants us to grow from childhood to spiritual maturity. But he is always there, watching over us, ready to come to our aid."

Isn't that how God the Father loved his own Son, Jesus? He allowed him to suffer trial and temptation, agonizing hardship, and even death. And yet he was always with him.

And he is always with us. No matter how trying our own circumstances might be, no matter how fearful, no matter

how long and dark the night through which we must pass, our God is always with us. His love is always there for us.

*God's Love Is for Each of Us*

I emphasize this because I know how easy it is to hear those words, "God loves you," and let them roll off because they are so familiar. *Yes, yes. God loves me. How nice. So what else is new?*

But the truth that God loves us is not just a nice, pious-sounding cliché that we pay lip-service to. We cannot just let it roll off our backs. We need to let the truth of God's love for us sink into the very core of our being, to take root deep within us, until it becomes the bedrock, the foundation of our lives.

Jesus told a story that shows what a difference it makes to build our lives on a firm foundation:

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.

MATTHEW 7:24-27

Jesus compares what is built on rock to what is built on sand. What is built on rock is a life founded on the words of Jesus and on the assurance they bring us that God loves us. The foundation of our life must be the solid, firm assurance that we are so deeply, radically, totally loved by God that nothing that comes our way can undo us. Because even the house built upon the rock, Jesus' story indicates, will be buffeted by the winds and rain. In other words, every life will contain its share of difficulty and heartache. But when we

rest secure in God's love for us, none of that can destroy us. None of it can shake our joy, our peace, our confidence.

*God's Love Pierces the Darkness*

Many years ago I went through a period of great personal anguish and difficulty. I especially remember one particular afternoon when I was about as low as low can be.

My surroundings at the time were not especially helpful: I was standing at the window on a gray, rainy afternoon, looking out at some rather bleak scenery. I was living in a mining town that had fallen on hard times, and all I could see from my window were slag heaps and empty railroad yards. The dismal view pretty well reflected my gloomy mood.

"O God," I prayed, "if you're there, if you care about me at all, help me. Do something to show me that you haven't abandoned me." I can't say I prayed that prayer with much hope. I don't think I really expected an answer. But as I turned away from the window, I felt as though I bumped into someone. I didn't, of course, at least not physically. There was no one there. Or was there?

Then I heard the voice of God, speaking directly to my heart. "Don't you know I've been with you all the time?" That was all he said. But in that moment, I felt the way I think our young Indian brave must have felt when he turned around and saw his father perched on that rock, watching over him. *Don't you know I've been with you all the time?* And in that moment, I *did* know. I knew, deep in my heart, that no matter how bleak things might be, my Father loved me and was always there for me.

*God's Love Is Faithful*

God's love for us is a faithful love. We read in the book of Isaiah the prophet:

For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,

says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

ISAIAH 54:10

When we can look around us and see, figuratively speaking, how the mountains and hills are being shaken, it takes a real exercise of faith on our part to rest in the assurance of God's faithful, reliable, trustworthy love. We see the trying circumstances around us so clearly. We may see difficulties in the lives of our children, our spouse, our friends, our relatives. We say, "Why did this have to happen?" It takes faith to be able to say, "My God is in charge, and my God is a God of love."

But that is what we need to say. That is the truth that we must proclaim to ourselves, over and over and over. "God, I'm going to remember that you are a God of faithful love. I'm not going to harden my heart because of what has happened. I'm not going to close myself off from you. I'm going to remind myself that you love me and that you will never leave me. I'm going to put my faith in that fact and trust you to reveal your love and care for me in due time."

That, after all, was what Jesus did in the crisis of his life: he trusted in God's faithful love for him. When he had been mocked and scourged and stripped and spat upon and hung on the cross, did it look at that moment as though God the Father loved him? And yet he did. God loved him and never left him. He was with him all the time. And because Jesus put his faith in God's faithful love for him and endured the agony of the cross, God was able to raise him up from death and release through him the resurrection power that transforms you and me.

### *God's Love Conquers Sin*

One Saturday afternoon I went to confess my sins and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It was no different from any other Saturday afternoon, and as far as I was concerned, it was no different from any other time of confession and reconciliation. I walked into the confessional, sat down, and began the familiar rite. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been two months since my last confession. I

have committed the following sins.” And then I rattled off a number of things I had done. It was a fairly unexciting list. I hadn’t killed anybody or robbed any banks. Pretty tame stuff, all in all.

When I finished my little recitation, I sat back and waited for the priest to continue with the rite. But he didn’t say anything. There was just silence. I waited. After a few moments he asked me, “Is there anything else?”

“No,” I said. “That’s about it.” I wondered if I should feel embarrassed for taking up his time with such a penny-ante collection of sins.

Another long pause. What on earth was he doing? Maybe he was praying for me. But what for? Finally he breathed a deep sigh. “Let me ask you something,” he finally said. “Are you *sorry* for anything you’ve confessed just now?”

Was I *sorry*? Why, *certainly* I was sorry. Not that I had done anything to be all that terribly sorry about, but ... well, I was in confession, wasn’t I? Sure, I was sorry. How could he ask such a question?

I arched my back and drew myself up to my full five-foot-three-inches and started to say, “Yes, Father, of course I’m sorry.” But the words wouldn’t come out. I began to think about what it really means to be sorry for my sin. I thought, “If I were really sorry, would I come back time after time repeating *all* the same sins? No. If I were truly sorry there would be some difference over time.”

“No, Father,” I finally whispered. “I guess I’m not really sorry for anything I’ve said.”

He sat there quietly for a few moments before speaking. “I could grant you absolution,” he said. “But I’d rather not.”

I just stared at him. I had never had a priest say anything like that to me before—and there were times when I had confessed sins more serious than these.

“I mean, I *will* grant you absolution if you want me to,” he went on. “There’s nothing to say that I can’t. All the conditions for the sacrament are fulfilled, technically speaking. But I’d rather not. I’d rather wait and have you come back when you have known sorrow for your sins.”

I felt pretty small walking out of that confessional. But I had to admit that the priest's suggestion was a good one. I was troubled by my lack of remorse, too.

For the next four months—yes, that's how long it took—I knelt before the Lord and asked for his help. "Lord, have mercy on me. You are the creator and I am the creature, and I have sinned against you. Break down the hardness of my heart so that I can know sorrow for my sins. Have mercy on me, that I might know how much I need your mercy."

And that is exactly what he did. He showed me who I was in relation to him. He showed me how my sin brought grief to him. He broke the hardness of my heart and led me to true sorrow for my wrong thoughts and words and actions. And then, out of that brokenness and humility, he brought me to a certainty of his forgiveness, of his merciful love for me. The Lord had mercy on me.

God's love is merciful. The book of Sirach says it so beautifully:

You who fear the LORD, wait for his mercy,  
 turn not away lest you fall.  
 You who fear the LORD, trust him,  
 and your reward will not be lost.  
 You who fear the LORD, hope for good things,  
 for lasting joy and mercy.  
 Study the generations long past and understand;  
 has anyone hoped in the LORD, and been  
 disappointed?  
 Has anyone persevered in his fear and  
 been forsaken?  
 has anyone called upon him and been rebuffed?  
 Compassionate and merciful is the LORD;  
 he forgives sins, he saves in time of trouble.  
 SIRACH 2:7-11 (NAB)

Later in the same passage, the writer concludes, "Equal to his majesty is the mercy that he shows" (Sir 2:18). We so often think of the awesomeness, the power, the grandeur of God.

Well, *equal* to that majesty is the mercy that he shows to

you and me. Receive that merciful love. Take it in. Absorb it. Don't try to reason it out. Don't try to earn it. You can't. You will never be worthy of it. But it is there for you. Be humble. Accept it and begin to lead a life befitting repentance.

### *God's Love Conquers Fear*

The one person who, more than almost any other, encouraged me in my walk with the Lord was a friend of mine, a Sister of Mercy named Sister Baptista. Those of us who knew her well called her Bapy for short. She was many years older than I, but I thought of her as a friend. She was a woman of great holiness and courage and love. Sadly, she was also a woman who suffered from a seriously diseased heart. And I knew that despite her courage, she was afraid of dying.

For several years we prayed that God would heal her heart and prolong her life. But in time it became clear that that was not God's plan, but that he intended to bring her to himself. It was clear to her, too, and she tried to accept it peacefully. "I'm trying," she would say, "I'm trying. But I'm so afraid."

All this time she would speak to others about the faithful and merciful love of God. We would say to her, "Bapy, what about *you*? Don't you believe God loves you?" And she would answer, "Yes, of course I do. But there is still a part of me that is so afraid."

The day she was taken to the hospital I reached there as quickly as I could so that I could be by her side. Her situation was grave. But when I entered the intensive care room, I was overwhelmed with a sense of peace. I couldn't describe it, but it was there.

I started to say something to her, but quickly realized that she hadn't the energy to concentrate on conversation. So I just knelt down by her bedside, with my lips close to her ear, and began to pray the Twenty-third Psalm. *The Lord is my shepherd...*

She lay there, not moving, not showing any expression on her face, until I reached the end of the psalm. *And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.*

Suddenly a faint smile played across her lips, and she repeated very quietly, "All the days of my life. All the days of my life."

Not wanting to tire her, I rose to leave. But before I did I heard her call to me. I turned around. She looked at me now with a huge smile on her face, and said simply, "We love you."

"Bapy, what do you mean?" I asked her. I wasn't sure what she meant by "we."

"Oh, child," she said, "Jesus and I, we love you.' As she lay at the very gates of death, she felt such union with the Lord that she could say, "We love you."

### *God's Love Is Healing*

She was healed. There was no fear, no anxiety. In the face of the one thing that had always terrified her, she could love. She could reach out and give me immeasurable comfort through her words. She could care for another, and not worry about herself. The faithful, merciful love of God had enveloped her and healed her of her fear.

That is the kind of healing love that God the Father has for you and me. I have witnessed dramatic physical healings. I have witnessed tremendous emotional and psychological healings. God's love provides those as well. But what I saw in my friend that night in the hospital was the greatest healing of all. That night I saw the love of God manifest as faithful, as merciful, as healing, and it spoke to me as nothing else before or since has spoken to me.

Let it speak to you, too. Let God's love come into your heart. Do you know God as faithful? As merciful? As the great healer? That is how he wants to make himself known to you. Open your heart to him. It's so easy to close ourselves off, to say, "Well, it's true for others but not for me." Or to say, "Poor me. I've been through so much. I have a right to be bitter." And all the while God stands so close to us, reaching out to us, waiting for us to reach out to him.

### *God's Love Is a Gift*

He waits to give us his love, his faithful, merciful, healing love. And he offers it as a gift. Not as something we have to

earn. As a gift. If you've never received it, I urge you to open your heart right now and to say to God simply, "I accept your gift. I accept your love in my life." That simple act of faith makes all the difference.

If you *have* received the gift of God's love before, I urge you to open your heart even wider and receive even more. God wants you to know his love ever more deeply. As you do, you are transformed, and God's kingdom comes forth. And as God's kingdom comes forth, we can all rise together as the people of God, who know who he is, who know his faithfulness, his mercy, his healing, his love.