

## Baptism of Our Lord C - 2016

Imagine this scene. A family is sitting down to dinner...Mom, Dad & Jr... Jr is just picking at his food,...so his dad says to him, "...Jr. you're not going to get your green beans until you finish your dessert 1<sup>st</sup>."...Now, isn't that every kid's dream?...Getting to eat the good stuff 1<sup>st</sup> before having to eat the other stuff...We were all brought up to think we had to earn our dessert...You know, ....eat your veggies & then you'll get the ice cream...Not so with God...With God, we get dessert 1<sup>st</sup> without having to earn it... We read in Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you."...God loved me even before I became me...I didn't have to do anything to deserve His love. It's the same for you.

And it was the same for Jesus...As He is being baptized, He hears these words from God, "You are my Beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."... Before Jesus begins His ministry,...before He has done anything, He gets dessert 1<sup>st</sup>....He is declared the beloved Son of God...It is after that that Jesus goes into the desert to be tempted & tested to prepare for His ministry...Then He returns from the desert & goes out among the people, teaching, preaching & healing...giving hope to all, sharing God's love with all, ... without any consideration of worth or deserving... Jesus loves all people simply because we too are beloved sons & daughters of God...God in Jesus Christ loves us...There is nothing we HAD to do to make God love us...We get to have the dessert without having to eat the veggies 1<sup>st</sup>....You can't beat that.

Ok, I'll bet right about now, some of you are thinking – I know because I've heard it before - ...”Here we go again, ...another homily about how much God loves us...yada, yada, yada...Why do we need to be told this over & over?...We get it, we get it.”...Well, the reason preachers keep preaching God's great love for His people,...is because there are times when we need to be reminded, reassured that (1) there's nothing we can do that will change God's love for us...& (2) nothing that happens in our life – good or bad - has any connection with how much God loves us. Let's look at two examples.

CASE 1: In my ministry I've had people - young & old - say to me things like this: "Dcn Ron, how can God forgive me after the awful things I've done...How can God still love me ?"...When we find ourselves asking questions like this,...we can be sure the answer isn't that we deserve God's love & mercy...None of us does...The answer is grace – pure grace – God's undeserved love & mercy flowing down to us from the cross of His Son...When we start thinking that something we've done is too terrible for God to forgive,... we are saying that our sin is greater than God's mercy;...we are saying our sin is greater than Jesus' sacrifice...And that just isn't so.

The Bible says a lot of things that give us confidence that if we confess our sins –no matter how bad they are - if we trust in what Jesus has done on our behalf,.. & ask Him to come into our life to change us,...then God is willing to completely forgive us...For example, Ps 103 says about God: "*For as far as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him...*"In Isa 1, God speaks: "*No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it... I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool...*"Again, in Is. 43, the Lord speaks: "*I alone am the one who blots out your sins for my own sake, & I will never think of them again.*"...Here, God is saying that our sins are not just forgiven,... we are pardoned – ...just like the President of the US pardons prisoners - as if what we did never happened...

And in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we have Jesus- the Good Shepherd - telling us that when we are lost in our sinfulness, He will never give up trying to bring us back to His flock...We are more important to Him than 99 sheep who never left .

---

---

Here's the bottom line: I sin, you sin, everyone sins,...& every sin is an unloving act toward a God who loves us anyway,...& nothing will change that...So if you ever feel unforgiveable, get over it. You're no worse than the rest of us...Instead, get on your knees & ask for forgiveness, ..& get to work making the changes you know God wants you to make to get your life back on the right track.

---

Case 2: There will be times when we won't feel loved by God...When our life begins to come apart at the seams & things are going so badly, we may even question whether or not there is a loving God... Or we might wonder if we are being punished for something we've done....I've had patients who were going thru one painful suffering after another, say to me things like, "I must've done something terrible to have ALL this happen to me."...But according to the Bible that's not how God works...In Lk 13, Jesus made it very clear to people who thought that God worked that way, saying, "No, I tell you. No!"...And in His Sermon on the Mt,...Jesus told the crowd, "God makes the sun shine on the bad & the good,...& He sends rain on the good & the bad." ...No one – good or bad –escapes troubles in this life. ..Every one of us has just come out of a troubled situation,.. or is in a troubled situation,...or will be in one soon...We have to deal with it!

Pain & suffering are reminders that we live in a fallen, broken world & we aren't home yet. That isn't the way God created it to be,... but we messed it up & we are reaping the consequences. OK, we accept pain & suffering are part of life... What is harder to understand is how the good & loving Father that Jesus showed us when He said, "Whoever sees me, sees the Father,"...can sit by & watch so much suffering in the world & just let it happen. ..Well, as a loving father, there were times when I could've stopped my child's pain, but I didn't....I remember taking my 2-yr old son to get a Polio shot...He didn't understand that the shot was to keep him from getting sick. ...All he knew was the needle was gonna hurt & that I could 've stopped the nurse from doing it, but I didn't. ..."Doesn't daddy love me?"...Of course, I did...It hurt me to see him suffer...I was doing it for his benefit,... but his 2-yr old understanding was limited.

And compared to the all-knowing God of the universe, our understanding is even more limited. ...God's wisdom is infinitely greater than ours,...so it shouldn't be hard to believe that a loving God could allow a terrible thing to happen because He foresees that in the long run more good will come of it than if He miraculously made it go away....God showed us very clearly how this can work when He allowed the Son He loves to suffer & die on the cross even though He could've stopped it...He let it happen so that the gates of heaven would be opened for undeserving sinners like you & me...And if it happened there,...if the worst evil in history – the killing of God's Son – could result in such a great good, .. then it can happen in our lives...Trouble & suffering can lead to great good.

Most of us who've been around a while can remember a time of suffering in our life that did bring about some considerable good...As we were going thru it, though, we might've said, "I don't see how anything good can cum from this."...Yet looking back on it we saw the good that did come.....St. Paul. – who had been stoned & whipped & put in jail,...ship-wrecked, hungry, thirsty & cold, pleaded with God to end his suffering,...& God said, "No!... Because it is when you are weak that you are strongest." ...That's when we realize that the strength we need can come only from our trust in the Lord...Out of His great love,...God uses difficult challenges to help us grow in our faith & strengthen our character,...to build up our endurance for the next time,...& to be an inspiration for others...God allows suffering to help us become more sensitive to the suffering of others,...& to appreciate our blessings even in times of sorrow....God never loves us more than when we are hurting, in pain.

At our Baptism, we were pronounced God's beloved sons & daughters... In Rom 8, Paul tells us how beloved we are... "Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love?... I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.... Death can't, & life can't. The angels can't, & the demons can't... Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away... Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

My Friends, God loves and cares deeply about you & me. Nothing will ever change that. AMEN!