

Good Friday

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“I pray that I may realize that God loves me, since He is the Father of us all. I pray that I in turn have love for all of His children.” Amen **Twenty-Four Hours a Day**

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

I am still amazed at the journey that Jesus has taken. His life was fraught with danger from the moment of his birth up until his death in his adult life. The divine Father guided and shielded his human parents until he continued the journey as an adult. Through his adult life up until his death, his divine Father was there. There were a number of acts that Jesus completed to fulfill the prophecies. In an article titled God is Love tells us this:

“So one way God defines Love is in the act of giving. God sacrificed his only Son so that we, who put our faith in His Son, will not spend eternity separated from Him. This is an amazing love, because we are the ones who chose to reject God, yet it’s God who mends the separation through His intense personal sacrifice, and all we have to do is accept His gift. We find no conditions placed on God’s love for us. God doesn’t say, ‘As soon as you clean up your act, I’ll love you;’ nor does He say, ‘I’ll sacrifice my Son if you promise to love Me.’ In fact, we find the opposite. God wants us to know that his love is unconditional, so He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us while we were still unlovable sinners. We didn’t have to get clean, and we didn’t have to make any promises to God before we could experience His love. His love for us always existed, and because of that, He did all the giving and sacrificing long before we were even aware that we needed His love. God is Love, and His love is very different from human love. God’s love is unconditional, and it’s not based on feelings or emotions. He doesn’t love us because we are lovable or because we make Him feel good: He loves us because He is love. He created us to have a loving relationship with Him, and he sacrificed His own Son (who also willingly died for us) to restore that relationship.”

I have received love, I have given love, I have lost love. The loss of that love felt like a living death. It was very painful and emotionally devastating. It was conditional. But I never lost God’s love, no matter what. No matter how I acted, behaved, did or did not do, God still gave me his unconditional love. How do I know this? I know this because I am standing here before you today, proclaiming the Gospel, passing on the good news. God shielded, protected and guided me through all the difficult and joyous periods in my life. Every time that a situation felt hopeless, something would reveal itself in a solution or an aid. It may not have been what I had hoped for or wanted, but rescue was there. I didn’t understand it fully at the time, but looking back I have a better understanding.

When I reflect back on those times, I remember the words from ***Footprints in the Sand***. It was the last question that was so profound and wondrous:

“I noticed that at many times along the path of my life, especially at the very lowest and saddest times, there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it. ‘Lord, you said once I decided to follow You, You’d walk with me all the way. But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me.

He whispered, 'My precious child, I love you and will never leave you. Never, ever during your trials and testings. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.' "

I believe that a parents love, for the most part with few exceptions, for their children, is the closest thing to God's unconditional love. My mother had always told me, "I will always stick by you, I will never leave you. If you do something wrong, I will hold you accountable, but I will be by your side always." And she did and she was. Both parents were. Fortunately I did not get into any serious scrapes. But there were some hard lessons learned along the way. She also told me, "You need to have Faith, know God's Love and protection, Love your brother and sisters. Because I will not always be here physically, but will watch over you all with God's help when I'm gone." This message of God's love was repeated to me a number of times throughout my life in one form or another. But the message was most strongest, direct and heartfelt one month before she died.

I still have a hard time wrapping my head around the courage and commitment that Jesus exhibited before his death. He KNEW what was to come. On top of that, it was not going to be an easy or quick death. But long, drawn out and painful. He told his disciples many times what was in store for him. Jesus told his disciples that he needed to die in order to save mankind, that one among them would betray him. He was sold out for 30 pieces of silver which amounts to about \$450.00. That another would deny him three times, then they would hear a cock crow. Part of our human nature for survival is the "fight or flight" response when faced with extreme danger. I try to put myself in His shoes. If I saw a mob coming for me such that came after him, I would have a very strong instinct to run. But, the huge difference is that Jesus is part Devine. He is not an ordinary person such as I am. He was very committed to His "rescue mission" to save our souls.

Love has been a strong message from Jesus in his teachings and by example of his death. One of his other heartfelt messages was that of forgiveness. There are many bible quotations that speak of forgiveness from Jesus and other disciples. I ran across an article from Mayo Clinic, ***Forgiveness: Letting go of grudges and bitterness.*** It offers compelling evidence about forgiveness that Jesus is trying to teach us. Some highlights:

"When someone you care about hurts you, you can hold on to anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge—or embrace forgiveness and move forward.

Who hasn't been hurt by the actions or words of another? Perhaps a parent constantly criticized you growing up, a colleague sabotaged a project or your partner had an affair. Or maybe you had a traumatic experience, such as being physically or emotionally abused by someone close to you. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger and bitterness—even vengeance. But if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

Forgiveness means different things to different people. Generally, however, it involves a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you might always be with you, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help free you from the control of the person who harmed you. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting or excusing the harm done to you or making up with the person who caused the harm. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life."

The article goes on further to point out the benefits of forgiveness. Why it is so easy to hold a grudge and what the effects are, reconciliation, change or not. We even experience health benefits as a result of forgiveness. What to do if we, ourselves need forgiveness. The points in the article have many similarities to what Jesus has been trying to teach us.

The Passion Gospel is one of the more challenging readings for me. It begins with fear, betrayal, rejection, pain and suffering. But it also offers the message of Love, forgiveness, hope and reconciliation. What we do with this message or how we interpret it, is up to us. On reflection, maybe you remember a past experience of how good forgiveness made you feel. The experience of Love and what it can do for our overall peace and happiness. This is a season of the renewal of forgiveness, love, hope and faith. It is a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made because he loved us. How he advocated for us as a people with his Father to forgive us our sins.

I offer this meditation for the day:

“It is a glorious way—the upward way. There are wonderful discoveries in the realm of the spirit. There are tender intimacies in the quiet times of communion with God. There is an amazing, almost incomprehensible understanding of the other person. On the upward way, you can have all the strength you need from the Higher Power. You cannot make too many demands of Him for strength. He gives you all the power you need, as long as you are moving along the upward way.” ***Twenty-Four Hours a Day***

Amen.