

[Readings: Acts 10:25-26, 34-35,44-48; 98; 1 John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17]

I don't really know all of the abbreviations used in texting. I know what "LOL" means: "Laugh out loud." "TTFN" means "Tata for now!" My twin sister taught me what "LMAO" means, but I cannot say it in church! I learned last year what "BFF" means: "Best Friends Forever." Question: How many Best Friends Forever in your life have remained Best Friends Forever? The problem with our "forever" is not so much our sincerity as our limitations.

We are mortal; that is, material with an expiration date that will be sooner than we think, no matter what we think. And everything else about us has its limits, too: patience, talent, endurance, health, compassion, kindness, and love included.

When we make our vows and speak our "forever," we always do it while holding our breath. We *hope* to be faithful forever. At least, we're sure gonna try. Meanwhile, in that same breath, sin is at work in us and in our world, doing its darnedest to make liars of us.

Sin lurks at the edges of our goodness and our best intentions. Its victory is in our failure and, ultimately, in the death of our will to so much as try. The ultimate victory for sin used to be in its supreme price: the sting of death, the obliteration of the final chance to try. But something looms larger than death on the horizon of our humanity: God's love for us. Because God has no problem when it comes to "forever." So we believe.

No one has a greater love to show us than this. The compassion of Jesus, faithful all the way to the cross, demonstrates that love beyond a shadow of a doubt. If we're really looking for true love forever, this is it. And if we hold fast to it, we are promised a joy so complete, nothing will be lacking ever again.

One of the lines from the great American movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, used to puzzle me even as a kid. Near the end of the movie, when the Wizard finally presents the Tin Man with his honorarium, a ticking heart to fill his sense of

emptiness, he advises him with these words, "Remember, my friend: A heart is not judged by how much you love but by how much you are loved by others."

This saying confounded me. It went against everything I had been taught about evaluating myself according to the volume of my efforts.

In the end, as I stand before my King and Judge, won't I be judged by how much I loved other people? If my "work" in the business of love was not the standard and the message, then what was? What seems clearer to me in adulthood is that we cannot be at the center of our efforts to love. Of course we must have healthy self-regard and take care of ourselves before we begin.

But love, by definition, is a movement toward the other and for the sake of the other. The Beloved, the one we love, is always at the center. We can never be the measure of our own love. If we attempt to evaluate the success of our love by our experience, we have already failed.

So, if the Wizard's advice to the Tin Man doesn't win you over, then consider the writer of the First Letter of John: "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that God loved us and sent the Son as expiation for our sins." All of salvation is dependent, not on our efforts, but on God's. God's love is at the heart of the Christian faith, not ours.

Our love may be quite sincere, much of the time, and our works of love may be considerable. But in the end, all the love we finite folk are capable of isn't enough to save our necks or our souls. Fear not: God's got an infinite amount of love to give, and it's being lavished in our direction. And we are challenged to share it. How do we move from loving only a few to loving many, many more?

Those of us who are over 60 years old remember when the world was divided into two categories when we were kids: The Catholics and the "Publics." We had a different idea of where the "Publics" were going to end up when THEY died; we knew with absolute certainty where WE were going!

Saint Peter seemed to be trapped in that way of thinking. But just as the Roman Centurion Cornelius had his conversion, so did St. Peter. Entering the house of a Gentile was considered unclean, but Peter does it anyway.

The Holy Spirit stirs in the house of Cornelius, and his entire household is saved. St. Peter sees for the first time that “God shows no partiality.”

As Peter had to radically change HIS way of thinking, so must WE change OUR way of thinking who is “in” and who is “out.” Peter learned that Jesus’ message of salvation was not intended just for Jews.

It’s hard to break out of a mindset that’s been drilled into you from the time you were a child. Yet for all his faults, and they were plentiful and very public, Peter was also morally resilient. He was able to open his heart to the truth that the Spirit moves in ways beyond our understanding and control. What are you and I being challenged to change in our ways of thinking?

This weekend, we begin this year’s Catholic Services Appeal for 2018. The theme for our appeal is “Opening Doors to Grow with Christ.” Archbishop Allen Vigneron reminds us in his message that we are called to encounter Jesus anew, to grow daily as His disciples, and to give witness to the power of His mercy. Christians seek to be more like Jesus, to treat others as He did, to pray as He prayed to love as He loved, and to honor God in every area of our lives. Growing as His disciples demands that we embrace stewardship as a way of life.

Please read the materials you received in the mail this past week regarding the Catholic Services Appeal. The many ministries, programs, and services funded by the CSA reach out and evangelize in ways individual parishes could not do on their own. We carry out Christ’s ministry of mercy and love not as His slaves, but as His servants. And remember: a gift to the CSA is a gift to St. Martin de Pores Parish.

Knowing that the concepts we give our children about God and God’s ways are likely to hold sway in their hearts over the course of their lifetimes, it pays to make sure we’re conveying an honest and true image of God. Even though we and our children have been privileged to be raised in the Catholic faith, God’s ways are various and mysterious and we must let God be God -- as if we had a choice in the matter! ALLELUIA and AMEN!