

Lent 4 B
Ephesians 2:1-10
March 11th, 2018
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Free Gift

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." [Ephesians 2:8-10]

Unearned. Love is not something you can earn. It either is or is not. Who can earn enough to live even one day longer than his or her allotted time in this life? There are those-I am one of them-who think that they are so important, so indispensable, that it would be impossible for them to die or not show up for their jobs. 'Only I can do what I am doing and I do it better than anyone else. And I have consistently worked hard and done a good job, therefore, therefore I have earned what I have, I have earned what I am owed and the world is in debt to me for my services. In particular, my hard work has caused me to earn the respect of my superiors and my employer. I have earned my position and my status. No one compares to me!' And then you either die, retire, get fired or are replaced...

It is easy to boast and make a show of what we have earned, isn't it? I must drive a motor vehicle commensurate with my station and status in life, which of course, I have earned through my own blood sweat and tears and I am entitled to the perks of my position! I must wear certain clothes and buy my clothing from a certain store or clothing merchant [heaven forbid, not Wal-Mart!] emblazoned with a trademark that indicates the provenance of my array of vestiture. And then there is yet one more way of not so quietly boasting of my earned rights of success: the address at which I live and the size of my accommodations. All these are the measure of a successful hard working man or woman, who has earned their rewards and respect in this life. And of course there are the titles of old: Prince, Duke or Lord Christopher, your majesty, your honor, and so on. Today the titles have changed to letters usually after a name, like CEO CFO, MA or PhD; though sometimes they are titles like Honorable, your Honor, your Excellency (I love that one) Father, Doctor, Attorney, all indicative of the station in life you have earned. I don't believe God uses such titles...

Now this may sound or feel all too familiar. Maybe you have felt this way at some point, like me. But it sounds kind of funny when you apply it to your relationships. i.e....I should have a spouse who is commensurate in every way with my status and earned and deserved position in life, not someone who will reflect poorly on that status! [As though a relationship partner is like that house, car or suit of clothes] To look at relationships from another way in this line of thought, for example, imagine saying or thinking that: 'I have earned the right to be treated "right" by my spouse. I am a good provider. I take out the trash every night. I do the dishes. I vacuum the house. I am a great spouse. She should appreciate me for all my hard work.' (The implication of this line of thinking is that she doesn't!) When you hear these words, you may be getting uncomfortable in your seat, or perhaps find them fraught with a little humor.

That humor turns to sorrow when you contemplate thinking this way with regard to your kids. Imagine thinking you have earned their respect by virtue of your position as a parent. You can't buy it with gifts. You can't earn it with good deeds like trips to the ice cream parlor. Either you love your children or you don't. You show that love by being present to them like God is present to us. You earn your status in a relationship by being there for them when they need you. God is always there for each of us, whether we appreciate God or not. You show that love by listening to your children, just as God listens to us and our prayers. Sometimes God gives us what we want, and other times, the answer is no. Just like parents. But God is always doing better things for us than we can desire or pray for. In much the same way, like God, we can see the bigger picture for our children's lives and always, we not only wish them the very best, but we also try our best to do the best thing for them.

Feeling as though you've "earned" something may also lead to the idea you deserve a reward. This is problematic when it comes to our temptations and addictions. When it comes to food, there is a feeling that we have earned the reward of the right to eat what we want at the end of the day-something "really good"-something just for me-something I deserve for my hard work. So we pick up a box of Oreos or a pint of Ben and Jerry's. This becomes a pattern and it also becomes a spare tire around our waist when earning a reward becomes a daily habit and feeling of entitlement. Patterns lead to addictions, whether food or alcohol-like the glass of wine or more that you've really earned from your labors after a long day.

Feeling as though you've earned something is always problematic. Consider the parable of the laborers [Matthew 20:1-16] some of who worked the whole day, and some of whom came to work near sundown. The one who hired them paid them all the same wage and those who worked the whole day disputed the kindness of their

employer because they felt entitled to more than the ones who work only an hour or so. Jesus was quick to point out the pitfalls of feeling as though you have earned God's rewards. The same is true when we are jealous or covetous of someone else's earnings, feeling as though we have earned as much or more than they have.

Undeserved. Love is not earned, and by the same token, we do not deserve to be loved. Let me take you back to the days of your youth...Imagine walking up to a young woman in high school or college and indicating to her that you deserve her affection, respect and love. If she didn't slap you silly in the face, surely you would be deserving a rejection if she turned and walked away! How many of us approach the mating ritual that way, feeling as though we are too cool or God's gift to the other sex instead of pretty dam lucky that someone has even agreed to notice or speak to us? How lucky am I that that person even went on a date with me? And yet, we often approach our intimate relationships in just that way. 'I deserve your love because I am who I am, and because you who are undeserving of my affection have received my presence in this relationship, and I have deigned to be seen with you on my arm, which of course should do wonders at boosting "your" low self-esteem. You are so lucky I went out with or married you, as though no one else would have.' The truth is that anyone would be a hundred, no a thousand times better "catch" than a person who thinks this way about themselves in approaching relationships!

I don't deserve a job. I don't deserve what I have. All I have belongs to God, and everything is a blessing with which God has blessed me.

The question isn't what I deserve, but what others deserve from me.

Not Entitled. It is easy to feel entitled, as though I am more important than anyone driving on the road with me. Where I am going and what I am doing is more important than what anybody else is doing or where they are going. If I want to move over to the left hand lane, the person coming up behind me should let me in. 'It's me, Chris, and I am on my way to work. That is my space in that lane ahead of you. I am entitled to it. Get out of my way! I am entitled to that space, and if you take my space, you are stealing from me and I will therefore show you my middle finger as a means of greeting you when you pass by me.' Same thing with the line in the grocery store...'don't you cut in in front of me! Don't you take so long going through your coupons and holding up my precious time! I am the entitled one. I am more important than that older woman struggling with her Food stamp card. I have earned the right to be here, and I am entitled to quick and better service than this welfare person whom my taxes support.' Not a very nice image of me if I think or behave this way, is it? Certainly not a very Christian way of thinking or behaving

this self-centered, self-oriented way of being and thinking is contrary to the other oriented commandment of God: Love your neighbor as yourself!

I am not entitled by right of birth to anything or any more than anybody else. Someone will say I am entitled to certain rights as a citizen of the United States. This is true, but what I said is also true, even being entitled to these rights, I am not entitled to different or more rights than anyone else who is also a citizen. I am not entitled to my parent's love. I do not deserve it, and trust me, you cannot earn it. Love is a free gift. And so it is with God.

Does anyone really feel entitled to God's love? Are we really feeling entitled to life eternal? Are we entitled to be saved? God so loved the world that God did what God did for every one of us, undeserving as we are, and gave us the totally free gift of God's love and our lives.

Have we become so cynical that we feel if something is free, it must not be very good, like all the free gifts we hear about as a reward for our patronage of some product on TV sold by Ron Popeil or some other huckster? Unlike the "free gifts" we have become skeptical of on TV, the free gifts of God are of incalculable value to one and all.

Baptism is our birthright in God, but even more so, it is our free gift from God, a big free gift from God made out of love to us.

We do not deserve God's love. No amount of Good deeds can earn it. To quote St. Paul in Ephesians, "it is the gift of God-not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Nor are we entitled to that love because we are God's creatures.

Forget the words "earned," "deserve," and "entitled." Learn the words, "grateful," "love," and "blessed."

"But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ -by grace you have been saved-" AMEN!