

HOMILY
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Cycle B
Sunday, March 26, 2006

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There is a “Peanuts” comic strip that is very apropos of today’s Scriptural readings. Lucy turns to Charlie Brown and says, “I don’t understand love, Charlie Brown—explain it!” Charlie replies, “You cannot explain love.”

“Try, anyhow!” Lucy says.

“Well,” Charlie says, “this pretty girl walks by....”

“Why does she have to be pretty? Why can’t she be ugly with a big nose?”

“OK, this ugly girl with a very big nose....”

“I didn’t say *very* big.”

And Charlie sighs, “Not only can you not explain love, it’s even hard to talk about.”

When it comes to love, in a way, we’re no different than Lucy who said, “I don’t understand love, Charlie Brown—explain it!” Do any of us really understand love? One of the unfortunate things people sometimes say to parents of a large family at the time of the death of a child is that “at least you have all the others to love.” Every child is, of course, an only child—one and only in his or her uniqueness.

A few weeks ago, we were reminded of the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of his only son Isaac. A poet once imagined the inner thoughts of Abraham as he walked with Isaac to the mountain of sacrifice. “And if you had a son,” Abraham asks God, “would you offer him up like this?” Abraham’s son, in fact, is spared; but God’s only son is not.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

There is a story that comes out of the Bedouin culture. “Bedouin” is the Aramaic word for “desert dwellers.” To this day, these people live much as the characters of the Old Testament did. During a heated argument, according to this story, a young Bedouin struck and killed a friend of his. Knowing the ancient, inflexible customs of his people, the young man fled, running across the desert under the cover of darkness seeking safety.

He went to the black tent of the tribal chief in order to seek his protection. The old chief took the young Arab in. The chief assured him that he would be safe until the matter could be settled legally. The next day, the young man’s pursuers arrived demanding the murderer be turned over to them. They would see that justice would prevail in their own way.

“But I have given my word,” protested the chief.
“But you don’t know whom he killed.”
“I have given my word,” the chief repeated.
“He killed your son!” one of them blurted out.

The chief was deeply and visibly shaken with this news. He stood speechless with his head bowed for a long time. The accused and the accusers, as well as curious onlookers, waited breathlessly. What would happen to the young man? Finally, the old man raised his head. “Then he shall become my son,” he informed them. “He shall become my son and everything I have will one day be his.”

The young man certainly didn’t deserve such generosity. And that, of course, is the point. Love in its purest form is beyond comprehension. Love is not earned. You don’t “understand” love. Look to the cross. At the cross, we discover love in its purest form. What does this love impel us to do? That depends, since love is a many splendid thing.

The Gospels were written over a period of a whole lifetime, progressing through various stages. The First Gospel is from the church of Mark, who stressed the personal cost of love:

If you would be a disciple, you must take up your cross.

A few years later, the community of Matthew stressed the family aspects of love:

*Help each other; consider each other as members of the community;
correct each other; live in peace with each other.*

Several years later, the church of Luke extended love of insiders to outsiders: outcasts, women, lepers, sinners—everyone.

Much later, the Community of John gathered all these insights together and spoke of love as personal, communal and universal. Those signs at sporting events promoting John 3:16 are crude but true:

God so loved the world that he gave his one son.

When we accept that love, then we know first hand what love is all about. And when we love God enough to give ourselves, God will come and live in us. It is simple and amazing because love is simply amazing!