

Father O'Connor's Homily for 10 March 2024
Fourth Sunday of Lent – B

2 Chronicles 36: 14-16, 19-23

Ephesians 2: 4-10

John 3: 14-21

In 1968 Richard Nixon was running for the office of President of the United States, and the Viet Nam War was raging. One of the campaign photos was of a soldier in Viet Nam who, on his helmet, had the letters L-O-V-E.

A week later, Richard Nixon got a letter from the mother of that soldier, thanking him for making her son known throughout the United States. She asked him, “Could I please have a copy of that photo for myself?” Her letter was signed, “Sincerely, Mrs. Catherine Love.”

What that soldier had on his helmet was not a revelation of what was in his heart. It was simply stating his last name.

On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, when we look at the cross, we see on Jesus' head not a helmet, but a crown of thorns. We see above His head a sign which had His name on it. The usual custom for crucifixion was that the name of the crime was put on top of the criminal's cross.

In all four of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – it is related that Pontius Pilate ordered that a different kind of sign be put on the top of Jesus' cross. John's Gospel [John 19: 19] says that it was written in Latin, in Hebrew and in Greek. The message was: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

The acronym in Latin is I.N.R.I. In Latin, an “I” is the same thing as a “J” – they are interchangeable. So the Latin that Pontius Pilate had put up there is: “Iesus” (Jesus) “Nazarenus” (of Nazareth) “Rex” (the King) “Iudaeorum” (of the Jews).

We see in Jesus on that cross His unconditional love available to everyone. As Saint Paul tells us: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [Romans 5: 8]. We try to reflect that kind of love of Jesus in our relationships with others. But even with our best intentions, we sometimes add some conditions to our love.

Parents love their children, but conditions are attached, like: “I expect you to respect and obey me.” Right? Husbands and wives love each other,

but there are conditions attached, like: “I expect you to support me emotionally,” and so forth, right?

But in Jesus on the cross we see His *unconditional* love, available to everyone.

We were born needing to be loved and we learn how to give love in return.

When a baby is born, the child wants to be loved. And if you do not give the child the attention needed they will cry and scream bloody-murder until you do. The child is born needing to be loved, and eventually will learn from the parents how to love in return.

We are God’s children and it is like that for us too. We are born needing to be loved by God, and we learn how to love in return.

And so in today’s Gospel, we hear everybody’s favorite verse from the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” God has loved us first and we learn how to love God and our neighbor in return.

There was a man who felt very lonely. So he programmed his smart-devices to tell him that they loved him several times a day. But it didn’t do a whole lot of good because an “I love you” from Siri or Alexa is just not the real thing.

We were born needing to be loved and we learn how to give love in return. But God has loved us first. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.”

There was a child born in 1866 near Boston, Massachusetts. She was known early on as “Little Annie.” Her poor parents came here from Ireland. Her mother died while Annie was very young. Her father was an alcoholic, who was physically and emotionally abusive to his family. Shortly after his wife’s death he abandoned his children, so Little Annie, who had a vision disability, was placed in Tewksbury Hospital in Massachusetts at the age of ten and lived there for four years.

They called this hospital “The Almshouse.” It was for people without homes, without money, and it was also for people who were having alcohol, emotional and mental difficulties. A story about Little Annie says that with all she had been through, when she entered that institution, she shut down completely.

One of the nurses there took an interest in Little Annie, but Annie wouldn’t respond. This nurse then started baking brownies at home and

leaving them by Little Annie's door. They would go untouched – until one day the brownies were gone. It was a breakthrough.

Eventually Little Annie bonded with that nurse. She opened up and then began to let other people into her life. We know her today as Anne Sullivan.

What did Anne Sullivan do that was so noteworthy? She bonded with Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, and Anne Sullivan opened up the world to Helen Keller. And what did Helen Keller do? She passed on that love to other people.

Little Annie needed to be loved, and that nurse came and loved her. And then Anne Sullivan took that love to Helen Keller, who needed to be loved. Helen Keller carried that love to person after person after person. The chain got longer and longer.

You can look at the chain in the opposite direction, and where does it lead back to? All the way back to God Himself, who loved us first. And because God has loved us, we can love in return.

A non-believer can look at the cross and only see a man held there by nails, with a sign above His head with His name on it: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.

But we have been graced and favored to believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and we see so much more. On that cross we see love crucified and given for us: unconditional love that is available to every single person.

In childhood we learned that song: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” And the Gospel today tells us just that. John, chapter 3, verse 16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.”

And as Jesus Himself said when He finished washing His apostles' feet at the Last Supper: “I give you a new commandment: Love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other” [John 13: 14].

And the message of Jesus Christ, our Savior, for us disciples? “As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love” [John 15: 9].