

# *SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS*

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 26, 2006

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

*Words of Grace*

Texts: John 3:14-21

“God so loved the world.” This verse is so well known it is almost as a commonplace. But common it is not. In our religiously feverish world it is an *uncommon* message, uncommon in that people do not hear the grace of God, but the laws, pride and arrogance of men. Luther heard it as truly words of grace and called it “the Gospel in miniature.” May God let us hear grace this morning!

One morning a woman found a basket of food outside her front door. There was no hint of who had left the food or why. Naturally, she was pleased to find this food. Naturally she was thankful. She **shouted into the open air** for this generous gift, hoping that somehow her benefactor might hear her thanksgiving.

Next morning once again she found food outside her door. And the next morning. And the next. Her curiosity and her gratitude continued to grow until she determined that she would stay up all night to discover whom this caring person was so graciously providing for her needs.

But there must have been an instant during the night when she fell asleep. In that moment her benefactor had once again left food at her door unseen. For many evenings she tried to catch the mysterious giver, but again – for only a moment, she would miss the donor, and food would be at her front door. Her desire to discover the source of her daily blessings became intense. Every day she thanked silently whomever it was who was showing such care and faithfulness toward her.

She told her neighbor about this grace that had been happening to her. Much to her surprise, her neighbor smiled and said, “Yes, I know -- it’s been happening to me,

too." What a rich and caring person this stranger must be! The two decided to join forces to find the source of their blessings. To their surprise they discovered that every person they talked to was receiving the same blessing. All woke in the morning to find the gift at their door.

Then something happened. Where once she felt particularly blessed and tremendously grateful, that sense of blessing began to fade. Oh, the food was still there at her door every morning, just as bountiful and just as delicious, sometimes even more so.

But now she no longer felt special. She no longer felt that whoever was doing this for her really cared about *her*. Her thoughts no longer turned outward in gratitude toward the mysterious stranger and the unfailing gifts; her thoughts turned inward to greed and pettiness. *If she really cared about me*, the woman thought, *this stranger wouldn't be giving so much to my neighbors*. And then she stopped saying thanks every morning for the gifts at her door. She lost her curiosity about the giver, and she soon stopped thinking about the gracious giver altogether.

The most curious thing of all is that the gifts kept coming. Every day she would enjoy the bounty presented to her, eating and drinking and living on the gifts left for her. But she never spent another moment of her life trying to discover the source of her abundance; she never spent another moment of her life in thanks.

When she enjoyed her last meal and life left her body, the mysterious giver noticed that the woman had not used the food left the day before. Quietly, the mysterious giver entered her house and beheld her lifeless body. The mysterious giver had wanted nothing more than to be thanked, but had become the stranger.

Whom do you thank for your life? Or maybe I should put that question another way — are you thankful for your life? Have you stopped lately to consider how wonderful, how extraordinary our lives really are —that within the mysteries of the universe, from the primeval waters of this earth, we have been graced to appear, with

water and oxygen – with everything? Have you noticed the incredible array of creation laid out at our doorsteps every morning? The beauty of this spring morning. The rains nourishing the earth. The sights, the sounds, the smells, the feelings -- so many of which are yours alone, so many shared by us together? Does the fact that others are also so blessed lessen by one ounce the beauty of the gift you receive? Should it? Do you search for the mysterious giver who blesses you so, or have you given up the effort of discovery?

“God so loved the world” – these common words are uncommon in gracious meaning – but few, if any of us, behold them so. So Jesus appeared reminding us whom we should thank and how we should live out that thanksgiving with our neighbor. Jesus died unjustly in that work of love, yet, by this death, God even made that a gift, so that we should not perish in our forgetfulness.

To help us remember Jesus told us to celebrate one of those gifts of food in remembrance of God’s love for us – forgiving us for comparing what we have to that of others -instead of simply thanking the giver of all. God so loved the world that God gave Jesus to empower us to believe; to believe sometimes in spite of ourselves that the wonderful and mysterious giver is the one whom we name as God.

For the one who believes – believes, not just the words, not just the rituals, but is, body and soul, simply open to trusting God’s endlessly giving promises. Simply trusting that all that we have comes from the wondrous Giver of all – who made the universe, who loves all creation, who loves the nations, who loves us all. For in trusting in that God of gracious love; a trust borne by the Holy Spirit from the waters of our Holy Baptism, we will not perish in forgetfulness but live daily in what St. John calls “eternal life.”

“Shall not perish.” Do these words mean that if I don’t believe and I die I will perish in some hell? Real hell is not trusting in the mysterious giver *now*. Real hell is trusting in oneself alone. Real hell is not trusting in anyone or anything. For, if we are

not trusting in that mysterious giver, *we are perishing in this life.*

But if we trust in that very same gift of food upon our altar, a sign of the everyday promises of God for life, there is no perishing – even when we die. For, as the Ephesians reading so eloquently and graciously declared,

*God, who is rich in mercy, out of great love for us, even when we were the living dead, perishing through our trespasses, has made us alive together with Christ, so that God might show us the immeasurable riches of grace in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. God has created us in Christ Jesus for good works, which God planned to be our way of life.*

This is something of what “God so loved the world” graciously means. Let us be empowered by God’s grace through this Eucharist to live daily in thankfulness for the gifts of the new day, living out our thankfulness in works of love with whomever we meet.

*Amen*

St. Francis Lutheran Church  
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111  
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819  
E-mail: [StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net](mailto:StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net)  
[www.st-francis-lutheran.org](http://www.st-francis-lutheran.org)