

First Sunday in Lent B
February 18, 2018

Grace Vestry Retreat, Phoebe Needles
Fr. James

Genesis 9:8-17 *Psalm 25:1-9* *I Peter 3:18-22* *Mark 1:9-15*

HOW A GREAT LOVE WORKS

Nothing seems to be going right. Someone in the family is ill. Our friends are dying daily it seems. Fourteen children and three adults killed in the Parkland school shooting, the seventeenth incident this year! When will we ever get upset enough to do something about this travesty? Jackie is not doing well in school. The dreams we dreamed, the plans we made months ago are not to be. You feel alone, discouraged and wondering if anything can change. Work on the job has piled up, continues to pile up so that you never feel caught up.

Its a little bit like it must have been for Noah. Can you imagine? Forty days and forty nights? After all its not as if you could walk the dog, or the goat or that raucous peacock, or the skunk or the platypus. Well, at least, they provided ballast for the nights when the water got rough.

But the stink. None of us ever got used to it. And then the

wife was complaining, the daughters-in-law were fighting, and the only place to hide was in the hold where the odor was, well, as Shakespeare put it “the rankest compound of villaninous smell that ever offended nostril.” [from the Merry Wives of Windsor] There was a little opening through which we could shovel, but after all who wants to work day and night shoveling manure? I mean the boys and I had to work in shifts after awhile.

Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. No food, little water, no friends, except for the few desert wildlife Mark mentions. Doubts may have been Jesus' closest companions while there. Doubts are not a 21st century phenomena. The Evangelist Mark doesn't give us any details except that he was out there and tempted for that long month. I guess he didn't feel like he needed to give us details. He knew that you and I could fill in those from our own lives.

It is all well and good to recognize that everyone faces these times. But what can do about it? Set priorities, make new goals, start by changing one thing at a time? How many times

have we done that? Take a day off, treat yourself to lunch. It all helps for the moment, yet doesn't solve the problem. And then there is always the person who has it all together. Inevitably they come around when you are at your lowest with suggestions. Ha! Just what you needed to cap off the day.

Does the Biblical material have anything to say? Yes. The flood recedes and Noah and his family and the animals—can you imagine how relieved the animals are—come off the ark. But more importantly God decides not to destroy the world by water again and sets the rainbow in the sky as a sign, to remind himself that never again will he destroy the whole race even though it is ever so evil. He loves *us* more than he hates our behavior. The rainbow is a sign of that enduring love.

Marian Larson wrote up a little experience she had at school. Marian is a second grade teacher. She wrote, “Marty was a new second grader, a little girl burdened by poverty; she was unmended and dirty most of the time. The other kids made fun of Marty and called her names—they avoided her at all cost. As her

teacher I worked hard with Marty on the importance of cleanliness. Even as I rewarded her for her successes, I was hard on the child. By Thanksgiving there had been a transformation, and Marty, through hard work, had seen the value of being clean, neat and looking cared for.

On the first day after Christmas Marty came to school with a Christmas toy—a monkey that was perhaps the only new toy Marty had ever had. How she enjoyed him! He sat on her desk during work-time, went with her to recess, and traveled to P.E., music, library, and lunch—the two were inseparable.

My birthday came, and the principal announced it over the intercom, joking about my “being 29 again.” Late that day, Marty cuddled up under my elbow. “Teacher,” she whispered, “I didn’t know it was your birthday, or I’d have brought you a present.” I assured her that wasn’t necessary and thanked her for thinking of it.

The next day Marty appeared with a lumpy bundle wrapped in newsprint tied with string, reinforced with yards of cellophane tape and complete with a used red Christmas bow. Dark eyes

shining, she thrust it into my hands. “Here, Teacher, this is your birthday present.” Her voice rang triumphantly as she snuggled up for a hug.

I painstakingly undid the intricate covering, and there lay Monkey. I gasped, “Oh, Marty, you don't need to give me your monkey. You love your monkey.”

I tried to return him, but she hid her hands behind her back, firmly shaking her head. “Teacher, I want to give him to you. I want you to put him on your bed.”

There he still sits, reminding me that a little girl responded to my hard lessons with love, and out of love gave me her best—gave me everything that she had, no strings attached.

In the rainbow covenant, God gave his best out of love, no strings attached. And as the monkey yet sits on my bed, a sign of Marty's love, so the rainbow adorns the sky, a sign of God's enduring love for his people [source unknown].

God gave his best out of love again in his son Jesus. You know, there is a sense in which we cannot solve our own problems.

We have to be responsible for them. We are not victims, and yet I think the solutions somehow have to be gifts. God's gifts are the most important. But our own gift back to her is just as essential. When I give my life back to God unreservedly, then I make possible something that has never existed before. That something is a reservoir of love, which enables others to face Lent, to face the discouragement and aloneness and frustration and despair that life can bring. If I can but look up and see the rainbow, or Marty's gift, or Jesus, then maybe I can look around and say, who needs my gift of love?

In chapter five of *Growing Young* the research authors discuss the value of a Christian community welcoming every person, particularly young persons, who come through the door. The defiant, the needy, the atheist, the gay, the poor, the student. A warm welcome and an invitation to go home with you for a meal and extended friendship can be a gift that changes everything for both parties. When I give that gift I enable that person to cope, and something happens for me too. That something is a part of the

good news, the good news that all is not despair. Far from it. The victory of life over death, of joy over despair has already been won. I just need to find a way to participate in it, to pass it on. Look around. There is someone who needs you as you need them.

We have given this weekend to looking at alternate ways to be leaders of the body of Christ in this parish, this collection of Christians we have named Grace. Some of the ways have been organizational, some have been relational, all have been addressed in love. We can go home and say, well that was worth it or not, we can then move on as if it had never occurred. Or we can take the gift we have been given and determine to open it, embrace it, explore it and move to a much changed life together that will enable us to share love with our community in new and wondrous ways. I'm willing to give myself to doing all of that with you if you are but open to it. *So be it.*