

There are times I hear someone say, and I even catch myself thinking it occasionally: I haven't done enough to earn heaven; I haven't done enough to earn God's love. Today's Readings reject this; they say it's "stinkin' thinkin'."

Thinking that way keeps us away from having a deeper relationship with God, because we may never become the person we wish we were, or hope to be. This way of thinking denies Divine Mercy. All three of today's scripture readings teach us that God is drawn to us, not by perfection, but by our needs and shortcomings.

In the First Reading, God tells His people: come to the heavenly banquet! You're not perfect, but you're still invited; just accept me as your God.

In the Gospel we hear about that moment when Jesus finds out his cousin and friend John the Baptist was murdered by King Herod. His heart was aching; He was in deep grief and wanted some time to grieve alone. He goes to a deserted place to do that, but over 5,000 people heard where he went and sought him out.

Out of his love for them, Jesus puts aside his own need to grieve. He heals the sick there and feeds the people in a miraculous way with five loaves and two fish. The crowd knows Jesus loves them, and that nothing can separate them from the love of Christ – not even Jesus's own grief, the personal loss he's feeling.

And so St. Paul writes in our Second Reading: nothing can separate us from the love of God, the love of Christ (they're the same). St. Paul gives examples of powerful forces and says even they can't prevent Christ's love from reaching us, from getting through to us. He includes anguish and distress, things like loneliness, depression, rejection, shame, personal failures, our past life, unemployment, bankruptcy, grief, or social pressure on us that goes against God's values.

Sooner or later, some of these tragedies will befall us – it happens to our saints, too. But God's loving compassion and care wants to be with us in these circumstances, and stay with us as we work through them.

Christ is always "on call" for us, ready to console us and heal us. He takes us as we are, even when we're in a condition we wish we weren't in. He's with us in our brokenness. He'll work through us and do amazing things with who we are and what we have. He'll multiply our effectiveness over and over again.

Christ will never reject us. Our weaknesses and failures don't drive him away. He knows our sins and sinful tendencies and never stops loving us. We don't have to be afraid of losing his love, or that his love will wear out, or that he'll get tired of us.

Now the devil uses our sufferings, and our self-doubts about God's love for us, to drag us into despair, hopelessness, or selfishness or revenge. Christians foil his plans when we strongly believe that the sufferings of this life are temporary and the resurrection awaits us. Then we respond to the evils that beset us with hope, perseverance and love. St. Paul's words fortify us on dark days: nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

I have said that before a little differently: God loves us more than our spouses, more than our parents, more than our best friends. There is never a moment when we are unloved; we are never alone.

When critical people or mean people make us feel unlovable or worthless; or when our mistakes and failures fill us with self-doubt and make us feel unlovable – remember that the love of God, the love of Christ, is with us and for us. No matter what we have done or what has happened to us, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Believe it!

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