

Up, Down, and All Around

[Texts - Genesis 28:10-17;

John 3:1-17]

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This week, I was reminded of a song I learned back in my early Sunday School days. Maybe some of you know it as well.

*We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
Soldiers of the Cross.*

*Every rung goes higher, higher,
Every rung goes higher, higher,
Every rung goes higher, higher,
Soldiers of the Cross.*

The message that this song planted in my young, impressionable mind, was that by exerting extreme effort and energy, I just might be able to crawl my way upward to the Heavenly Realm. In contrast to that message, are these words from today's New Testament reading: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended *from* heaven.... For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This familiar, yet powerful passage, reminds us that the blessing of Divine Love isn't something that you or I can - or need to - climb-up to heaven in order to capture. It is a *gift*, which has been graciously poured-out upon us, in and through the person of Jesus Christ.

One of the first scripture passages that many of us learn in our early Sunday School days, is John 3:16. Even people who aren't

raised in a Christian environment, if they watch any sporting events, have seen those big signs - *JOHN 3:16* - hanging down the third base line, or being waved in the end zone during a crucial field-goal attempt. [Though I'm never quite sure if they do that to help - or hinder - the batter, or the kicker. I guess it depends on whether they're rooting for the Angels or the Devil Rays, the Saints, or the Lions!] Either way, this ceaseless display of *JOHN 3:16* may make people leery or complacent concerning the simple, yet profound message, which this passage contains: "For God so *loved* the *world*, that God *gave*...."

In reflecting on this text, I got to thinking about the nature of - and the motivation for - *giving*. God loves, therefore God gives; because that's what love does. And in that Divine giving, God gives us God's finest and best! Therefore, it seems appropriate that - in response - you and I would seek to give God *our* finest and best. That's what we strive to do *here*, as an inclusive Family of Faith - to enhance our giving, our welcoming, and our reaching-out to others with the best gift of all: the Good News of Jesus Christ. In and through Jesus, God gives us an amazing example of living and loving at its absolute best. In the Spirit of Divine Love, Jesus welcomes all manner of people: tax collectors and "sinners", prostitutes and the destitute, outcasts and the "untouchable" lepers. Jesus is willing to touch and embrace *all* those people who religious society readily condemns and callously pushes aside. And to *do* this, Jesus is willing to give everything that he has, including his own life.

When Nicodemus approaches Jesus, it's as if he's trying to figure out why he chooses to associate with all those social outcasts. He says to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who comes from God; for no one can do the signs that you do apart from God." Nicodemus, like other religious leaders, has seen the gracious works that Jesus performs; yet he can't understand why Jesus wastes his efforts on those *losers* - why a teacher sent from God wouldn't be more insistent on enforcing all those high and holy rules and regulations. Nicodemus, and many of the other Pharisees and Sadducees, believe that their job is to make other people behave, so that maybe they can eventually crawl their way back into God's good graces. However, Jesus sees things from a completely different perspective: "Truly I tell you, no one can see the Realm of God without being born anew" – literally translated, "without being born from *above*." Yet Nicodemus doesn't understand. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" He is thinking in physical and finite terms; as if this being "born anew" is something that we can somehow naturally attain. So Jesus explains that being born anew is a gift of the Spirit, a gift "from above" - not unlike the wind.

Just as the wind comes sweeping down upon us without our efforts, so it is with the Spirit [or *Breath*] of God. We can hear the wind, we can feel its presence, but it's not something we can control. [Like those long-winded preachers: there's just no stopping us!] Jesus explains that being "born anew" is also not something that we can control, or manufacture. It is a gracious *gift* of the Holy Spirit. And if you and I believe that we must jump through hoops, or somehow scale the heavens in order to obtain this Divine Gift - or to experience the Divine Realm - we will find it extremely frustrating and futile. However, when we truly *trust* that God has already graciously welcomed us to be a part of that Divine Realm, we will be inspired to live more fully as God's faithful daughters and sons.

The Good News that Jesus proclaims and *embodies*, is that there is no need for people to try to work their way up to God! Instead, God comes to us - up-close and personal! In fact, God is with you and me right now - as the wind of the Spirit moves and breathes and lives among us. We *are* the Body of Christ! And as a Living, Loving Manifestation of Christ, you and I are empowered and inspired to give our very best - to share our gifts of time and talents and resources, so that the mission and message of Jesus Christ might continue to grow and deepen and expand.

I think that each of us has an innate need and desire to give. One reason I believe this, is because I've seen this desire in action, in the lives of little children. Many times, a small child has offered me a cookie, or a sticky piece of candy - even though I didn't ask for it, or necessarily want it. Yet I found I couldn't resist the giving of that gift. Maybe you've experienced this as well. There can be a whole plate of cookies sitting on the table, but your little friend insists on giving you his or hers. And when you take that cookie and say, "thank you", that child beams with absolute joy! That's because he or she was able to give you - a big person - something that was important to them - something that was theirs to freely offer.

A vital part of anyone's sense of self-worth comes from being able to give something to others; to know that they have something worthwhile to contribute. As Children of our Heavenly Parent, you and I can experience this awesome blessing, whenever we give something back to God. And the way we *do* this, is by caring for, and sharing with, the rest of God's children - our sisters and brothers. By feeding the hungry, by helping those in need, and by sharing with others the marvelous message of Divine Love and Extravagant Welcome, you and I not only help meet their needs, but we also appreciate more fully the blessings which are ours to give. And the more you and I realize how richly we have been blessed, the more we grow in our desire and our capacity to

joyfully and generously give. And so the giving increases exponentially, and the blessings continue to freely flow-down upon us all! Not because we're trying to work our way up to heaven; but because we have experienced a fantastic foretaste of heaven, right here on earth!