

I have to make a confession this morning about something that is a real challenge for me. I know it is not healthy, and yet, I find myself doing this. So, I confess.....I get the munchies. Quite often, when it gets to be around 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock in the evening, I get the munchies. You know that feeling when you are hungry for something, when you have a kind of hunger that is really gnawing at you, but you just cannot identify what it is that you want. This happens to me more often than I would like to admit. About 9:00 PM, one of worst times to begin taking calories into my body, I find myself hungry again and, while I cannot quite put my finger on what I want, I know that I want something more. So, I go to the kitchen and start poking my face in the cupboards to see if there is something that looks good. Then, I go to the refrigerator, open it, look inside and scan the shelves, still not knowing what I really want. Yes, I confess I get the munchies and usually I not only end up eating stuff I really do not need, but also stuff that is rather unhealthy.

The context for today's gospel reading is the story of Nicodemus, a man who comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness, and **he** is hungry. He comes to Jesus during the night, and he has a **spiritual hunger** that is gnawing away at him. He has a hunger deep within, a hunger he cannot

fully identify. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, so he comes during the night when he will not be seen. Yet, he comes wanting to find out more about what Jesus is teaching.

Spiritually hungry Nicodemus does not understand the things Jesus has been telling him so Jesus turns to a strange Old Testament story to make his point. This old story by the way would have been very familiar to Nicodemus, good Pharisee that he was. Jesus reminds him of the Israelites who, during their forty year wilderness wanderings, had sinned. They had grumbled about Moses and had grumbled about God, and they faced punishment. In part, the punishment was being bitten by snakes. The Israelites then cried out to God for deliverance and God used the strangest thing to save them. Moses formed a bronze serpent, mounted it on a pole, and hoisted it upward. When the Israelites looked at it, they were healed, they were saved from death from poisonous snakebites. Strange as it seems to us, the Israelites were instructed to look upon this bizarre symbol of redemption to be relieved of the suffering they had brought upon themselves by their rebellion against God.

Jesus then connects this strange story to himself as he continues to teach Nicodemus. He draws an analogy between the “lifting up” of the Son of Man and **Moses** lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness. Jesus

says that, in like manner, the Son of Man must be “lifted up” so that “whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” And, as he attempts to feed the gnawing hunger within the heart of Nicodemus, Jesus speaks words that have become one of the best-known, best-loved verses in all of scripture – John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

“For God so loved the world....” For God so loved the world? When I think of the world, I see a small planet in the vastness of space. And, this miniscule dot of a planet that is our world is so deeply, tragically broken. On this planet, people are daily being shot on our streets. The spread of terrorism and terrorist groups and the evil horrific acts these groups commit are creating increasing fear and reactivity in the world. There is unrest in so many parts of this world. 1.02 billion people in the world are going hungry. In fact, one in five children in our own country go hungry and do not have enough food to eat. In the developing world, more children are dying of diarrhea and infectious diseases than die of malaria and HIV/Aids combined. And, we have the power to change this, but have not yet done so. One in five children around the world do not have access to life saving vaccines and they consequently die. In sub-Saharan Africa, 7 out of 10

people lack access to electricity, the key factor that imprisons them in extreme poverty. 90 million children go to primary schools without access to electricity. Energy poverty plagues the sub-Saharan continent. In fact, to show just how impoverished people are, one football game in Cowboy's stadium uses more power and energy than the country of Liberia even has! Human trafficking is at an all-time high. Economic injustice is growing, here and abroad. Dysfunction seems to rule in government, rule in our own community, in our own families, and within our very selves! The world is so very, very hungry! Yet, God so loved the world?

Yes. God so loves this world! And, in the gospel of John the word for "world" refers to the cosmos – to everything! God so loves everything – the entire cosmos, the entire creation, this little miniscule planet that is hardly a speck in the vastness of space, **all** the people, the land, the animals, the bugs, the world's goodness and its evil. The gospel of John tells us God so loves the entire creation so much that the **entire creation** can find its home in God. Yes, God so loves the world with an **immense, redeeming** love. This is a love that disturbs us, gnaws at our hearts, creates a hunger for God, unsettles us, grasps us, and draws us into the very arms of God's love where we become forever changed and transformed. And, once we have been grasped by this love, we find it is a love that will never ever let

us go. We then discover our home, the home of all creation, is in God. Yes, God so loves the world and it is in turning one's face toward Jesus and looking to that cross where we finally find the love that fills the gnawing hunger in our hearts. There we discover the beloved one whom God gave to the world out of love for the cosmos. There we begin to know the breadth and depth of God's redeeming love for God's people. That is the way of Jesus, that is the message of the cross, and it is God's redeeming love that changes us and causes us to respond to the needs of the world. When God's redeeming love fills our hungry souls we are then compelled to work for peace and justice in this broken world.

In the early days of Jesus' ministry, Nicodemus came by night and had a gnawing hunger within himself. He came to Jesus, seeking to fill a hunger he did not really understand. Nicodemus was invited into the way of Jesus, invited into the love God has for the world, and he did not initially get what Jesus was saying. However, it is likely he grew in understanding and was transformed because when we get to the end of John's gospel we find out Nicodemus did **not** abandon Jesus. It was Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea, who cared for Jesus' body after the crucifixion. I have to think he was captured by the love God has for this world and he finally understood what Jesus had tried to tell him three years earlier.

Adelle, Owen, Griffin, and Kaela – in just a few short minutes you will be receiving communion for the first time. As you join us at this table, the bread and wine you will receive is the very life of God that will fill the gnawing hunger you will sometimes feel within your hearts. Always remember that in Jesus, the one who died on the cross, God has shown us the greatest love the world has ever seen. And, every time you come to this table, you will again be reminded of that as you are fed and nourished by the love God has for the entire world, a love that holds you and will never let you go!