

Mother Teresa once said, "The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty -- it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality.

There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God." I believe Mother Teresa's words are very insightful. I, too, believe there is a deep yearning and spiritual hunger for God in our country and in our world, a hunger that simply seems to increase with the passing of time.

Today's gospel reading tells the story of a man who has such a deep hunger for God. In this story, Nicodemus 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 his very soul. He has a hunger deep within, a hunger he cannot fully identify. Now, 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 Jesus and what Jesus is teaching.

Spiritually hungry Nicodemus does not understand the things Jesus has been telling him, so Jesus references 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.

Anyway, Jesus then connects this bizarre 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 some 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? Just think about that. When I think of the world, I see a small planet in the

vastness of space. And this miniscule dot of an insignificant planet that is barely even a speck in the vastness of space is our world, and it is so deeply, tragically broken. On this planet, people are daily being shot on our streets. Mass shootings abound as guns have become idols. There is war in Ukraine and unrest in so many parts of this world. The United Nations estimates that 795 million people in the world literally go hungry and suffer from chronic undernourishment. Economic injustice just continues to grow. There is no longer a day that goes by when we do not see some new manifestation of climate change, something we have brought upon ourselves. Hate and division seem prevalent in so many places within our culture. Dysfunction seems to rule in government, in our own communities, in our own families, and within our very selves! The world is so very, very broken! Yet, God so loved the world?

Yes. God so loves this world! And, in the gospel of John the Greek 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** the world’s deep brokenness. David Lose, when blogging about this verse writes, the Greek word *kosmos* “designates throughout the rest of John’s Gospel an entity

that is hostile to God. This means that we might actually translate these verses this way, 'For God so loved the God-hating world, that God gave God's only Son...' and 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn even this world that despises God but instead so that the world that **rejects** God might still be saved through him.' Really – God's love is just that audacious and unexpected. Which is why, according to Paul, it probably seems both scandalous and a little crazy. And that audacious, unexpected, even crazy character of God's love is probably why it saves!"

When Jesus appears on the scene, Jesus brings us a whole new understanding of the world God loves. God loves broken people. You see, God sent the Son to show us just how much, and to what lengths, God would go to tell us the world is loved with an audacious, transforming love. Yes, the gospel of John tells us God so loves the entire God-hating world so much that the **entire creation** can find its **home** in God. God loves this broken world with an **immense, immeasurable, 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 that our true 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 the 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 and 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. We, too, then see the world in a different light. When God's redeeming love fills our hungry souls, we are then compelled to work for peace and justice in this broken world.

As we hear Jesus' words today, we so often get stuck on verse 16. However, we really need to **hear** the words of verse 17 when Jesus says, "Indeed, God did **not** send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the **world** might be saved through him." Here Jesus affirms and repeats that the Son was **not** sent to condemn this God-hating world. Jesus' message is **not about who's in and who's out**, as far too many want to claim when quoting these verses. Rather, it is about God's consistent intent to love, save, and bless this **whole** world.....If God's love is for all, then we who have experienced that love in Christ are called to see persons of other faiths **and** persons of no faith through the lens of that

profound, surprising, unsettling, audacious love. That means embracing not just those who are like us, but also embracing all those we consider other!

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 whole world, the cosmos, and he did not initially get or understand what Jesus was saying. And, quite frankly, far too often **we** don't get what Jesus is saying. However, it is likely Nicodemus 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. He **was** ultimately **captured** by the love God has for this world because this is a love he could not escape.

I agree with Mother Teresa, there is a deep, gnawing hunger for love and there is a hunger for God in our culture and in the world. And the good news is that, in the person of Jesus, we discover a God who loves this broken, God-hating world and our very broken selves so deeply that **no one, absolutely no one**, can escape God's all-encompassing, unconditional love.