

Refreshing Our Faith 6: Grace & Salvation

Before we get started, let me just remind you how we got to tonight's topic. In the first talk, we talked about who God is and about our needing to *experience* God before our journey of faith could begin. In the second and third talks, Scripture and Tradition, we discussed how *others* have experienced God across communities and generations, and how they have documented the truths of those experiences. In the fourth and fifth talks, Sacraments and Church, we explored how we've formalized those experiences in order to experience God *as a community* and how those experiences form us into the People of God, Body of Christ. And in this final talk, we'll talk about how all this sacred knowledge impacts us *personally*, both in our lives today, and at the moment of our death.

Now since that last statement is a bit morbid, I thought I'd begin by sharing some epitaphs.

From Boot Hill Cemetery in Tombstone, Arizona:

Here lies Lester Moore
Four slugs from a .44
No Les No More.

From Margaret Daniel's grave at Hollywood Cemetery Richmond, Virginia:

She always said her feet were killing her
but nobody believed her.

From a Ruidoso, New Mexico, cemetery:

Here lies
Johnny Yeast
Pardon me
For not rising.

And from a cemetery in Kirbyville, Texas:

Pause, stranger, when you pass me by,
For as you are, so once was I.
As I am now, so will you be.
Then prepare unto death, and follow me.

- To which someone replied by writing on the tombstone:

To follow you I'll not consent,
Until I know which way you went.

And that's what our talk is about tonight: how do we know, which way we will go?

Basically, I want to make 4 simple points in tonight's talk:

- First, God is always loving us
- Second, we are free in terms of how we respond to that love
- Third, the way in which we choose to respond to God's love impacts our ability to become who He dreamt we'd be when created us.
- And finally, our response will impact our eternal posture before God, namely our salvation or damnation.

I don't know if you remember the first talk I gave on God, but I concluded that talk with a strange little story which I'd like to repeat for you and unveil the reason why I concluded that talk with it.

There was a young boy named Brian, who set off to school one day. His teacher was a rather structured and rigid woman. That day, Brian showed up to school one hour late. His teacher was upset and took him down to the principal's office and called his mother. "I've had it!" she said. "Brian was an hour late for school today!" Brian's mother couldn't understand. "He left in plenty of time." All day long, she wondered about what had made Brian so late for school. When he got home, she asked him, "Brian, why were you late for school today? You left in plenty of time." "Well," he replied, "it must have been the worms." "The worms?" she said. "Yes, you see, the rain washed all the worms up onto the sidewalk and I knew the other kids would step all over them, so I had to get them all back into their holes. I guess that's what made me late for school." "Brian," his mother said, "I love you!"

I first heard this story on the radio driving home from work one day. When the story ended, there were tears in my eyes and I couldn't figure out why. I'm not the sort of person who easily cries. But something about this story spoke to me. And so I began going through each of the characters to understand what was going on inside of me.

I first started thinking about Brian's teacher. Judging by her reaction, this wasn't the first time Brian had ever been late. It must have been something they had gone through over and over again. And so when Brian came in late this day, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. I'm sure it was no pleasure for Brian's teacher to march him down to the principal's office for tardiness. I'm sure it was no pleasure calling his mother – you never know how parents will react when you tell them their child isn't perfect. Heck, in *It's a Wonderful Life* even the saintly George Bailey yelled at Zuzu's teacher, and he even yelled at her husband. But it was Brian's teacher's duty to call. And she was a woman of duty. Yet it wasn't my understanding of Brian's teacher that made me cry.

So next I started thinking about Brian's mother. I can only imagine her careful passing on of values to her son. She seems like a caring mother, for instead of yelling at Brian's teacher, she wondered what could have made Brian late. She was introspective. I respect that. And so in the story I respected her. I can imagine that she had had conversations at Parent-Teacher night conferences where Brian's teacher said that Brian was always wandering in late to class. I'm sure she promised that Brian would start coming on time. And I'm sure she did all she could to get Brian up early in the morning, get him washed and dressed, get him breakfast and get him out the door. I'm sure she did everything she could possibly do. But the situation wasn't totally in her control, for unless she physically walked to school with Brian, she had to trust that he'd go straight there.

But Brian's mother did more than run around like a maniac every morning for the sake of her son. She did something much much more important: she was a woman of values who taught her son those values. Yet just like she could only take Brian so far in the morning before having to trust that he could get the rest of the way on his own, she had to do the same thing with values. I can imagine her sharing with her son the importance of others. The need for us to be a people of service to others. The need for us to love each other. I'm sure she shared these things with her son, but she had no idea how he would put these values to use. And so when Brian said that he was late because of his concern for the worms and his insight that the other kids didn't care about them as much, she must have been overwhelmed by the way in which he applied her values of love. What a grace to see such goodness in another person. What grace to see it in your own child and to be overwhelmed by their simple application of values to every aspect of their life. But it wasn't my understanding of Brian's mother that made me cry.

So the next character was Brian himself. I think Brian was a sincere kid – most kids are. I'm sure that in his heart of hearts he truly wanted to get to school on time each and every day. I'm sure he wanted to both please his teacher and his mother. But, unlike me, who is so goal driven that I ignore the needy things along my path in favor of getting to my destination, I think Brian was just the opposite. Unlike me, Brian cared about more than just his own goals in life. The world was too big for him. There were just too many needful things that he passed for him to be able to ignore them. And so Brian, without overtly realizing it, set priorities in his life, namely he put others ahead of himself. He knew he needed to get to school on time, but he just saw so many other things that needed as well that he lost track of his initial goal. He saw the worms squiggling in the spring rains and didn't see a fun target like most boys his age. Instead he saw their confusion, their vulnerability, and he did something about it. He let go of his focus on reaching his goal, and he focused on the here and now. Those worms needed him and he was the only one who saw it. The other kids would have a hay day stomping all over those worms. I know I used to love to do it. But for Brian, the world was different. And he knelt down, putting his book bag in the wet grass and getting his knees all wet, and picked up each worm. How he found the worm holes I'll never know. All I know is that whatever he did to get them home, he did for a long time —there were so many worms on the way to school. And I'm sure he knew that an irate person would be waiting for him when he arrived. But it wasn't my understanding of Brian that made me cry.

You see, I didn't understand why I cried until it hit me that there was one more set of characters in the story, one group of characters overlooked by everyone – everyone, that is, except Brian. Only Brian saw the worms. And I knew why I cried. Even though I know that God is a loving God, and even though I know that I'm not an evil person, there are times when I feel unworthy. There are times when I feel vulnerable. There are times when I feel exposed to life and afraid. Sometimes I feel like a worm on a rain soaked sidewalk. And I need someone like Brian to see me and care for me. Sometimes I need to be loved even though I don't feel worthy of that love. And it's only the Brians of this world that put themselves in a position to love me without my having to ask.

Do you ever feel like a worm on a rain soaked sidewalk? Do you ever feel low and unworthy and all washed up? Well, sometimes I feel like a worm.

Sometimes I feel like a worm because I lack faith. For example, sometimes I don't believe that God could exist and still allow the world to behave in the way it does. Other times I feel forgotten and all alone in the world. I feel like the skies are barren and there's nothing out there that can lift me off the rain soaked sidewalk I'm wriggling on.

Sometimes I feel like a worm because I lack hope. For example, sometimes I become presumptuous and believe that both God and the world owe me and I act with only my own interests in mind. Other times I become despairing and give up my trust in God's merciful ways. I feel like the rains of life will never stop beating down on me and that I'll drown if they don't stop soon.

Sometimes I feel like a worm because I lack love. There are times when I speak with angelic tongues, but I don't show love. There are times when I think I comprehend all mysteries, but I don't show love. There are times when I tithe all the good gifts I have over the feed the poor and hand over my time and talents to God, but I don't show love. Sometimes I am selfish and unconnected even though I see others struggling near me on life's sidewalk.

There's just so many things that flood me out of my comfort zone and wash me up all vulnerable where I can be trampled on and destroyed.

But just like the worms with Brian, sometimes we're surprised by the love of God. Sometimes God takes the worms on the sidewalk and puts them in safe places. Sometimes God takes *faithless* worms and says if we'd just let down our guard for one moment, if we'd just look up from the bottom of our lives, he'd give us a knowledge of his love so powerful that we'd never doubt in Him again.

Sometimes God takes *hopeless* worms and says that if we'd just trust in his merciful ways, that we'd stop having to prove our place in this world; because he already has a place for us, and it's on a pedestal. Sometimes God takes *loveless* worms and says that the thing that makes all of us human, the thing in us that was created in His image is not our talents, or our insights, or our generosity, but rather our capacity to love and *be loved*. God takes all those misguided worms, and puts them in safe places. He cares for us even though we feel unworthy.

And then I knew why I cried. This wasn't the story of a little loving boy who got distracted on his way to school one day. This was the story of God's love for us. And as little and unlovable and wormlike as I was feeling that day on my way home from work, God saw me differently. God saw me as worthy and lovable and He picked me up and put me in a special place. It was a humbling experience to see that I was not the arbiter of my value in God's world. That in God's eyes I was loved regardless of what I did or didn't do. And that unmerited love was too much for me to handle, because I grew up believing that I had to earn God's love. But the reality is that God is always loving us. Oh what a good weepy thing to realize in all its fullness: God loves us, each and everyone, both because of and in spite of who we are and what we do.

My hope is that the truth in that story connects with the truth you've already experienced in your own life, because it certainly echoes the truths of the Catholic Church. Let me explain.

Remember in that talk on God I discussed the insight of the Epistle writer, John, where he says that God is love? And remember how I showed that the very revelation of God as Trinity reinforces that insight: the image of God as a loving relationship with Father loving Son and Son loving Father through their Spirit. Well, if God is love, and if we are created in God's image, then *we* are created as Love, and *we* are created to always and everywhere live out that love in relationship with others, just like God does.

Now, not only are we created to give love, but just like God, we are also created to receive love. That's what living in relationship means: both giving and receiving. And God has indeed created us to receive his love. Some people say that we have a God shaped hole in our hearts that makes us long for him to fill us, that God has stacked the odds of our willingness to accept his love in our favor. A more theological way to put it is found in the insights of the contemporary theologian Carl Rahner, who says:

- We know God is always and everywhere loving us. But on top of that
- God created us as *worthy* of his Love – for in the creation story, at the end of every creative act, God said “it is good”
- And God created us as capable of *receiving* His love
- And God created us as not only worthy of and capable of receiving His love, but even more so He created us with the ability to *recognize* His love,
- And He created us as *hungry* for that Love, *desiring* that Love, *desperate* for that Love

Generally speaking, God has set us up for success. Now, loving us is God's part of the bargain. And you may even say that making us worthy of that love and capable of receiving and recognizing that love is an added gift that God has freely given us. But the response to that love, the “what difference does it make” aspect of that love, is up to us. God gives us freedom to do whatever we want with His love, and what we do with that love makes a huge difference in our ability to become the person he dreamed we'd be when he created us and called us good. For the more often we respond in kind to God's love, the more we say “yes” to God and His ways, the more we live in God's loving relational image, the more we fulfill the image in which we were created, the more we become our true selves. And surprisingly, the more we say “yes” to God and His ways in our daily lives, the more we're likely to say “yes” to God and His ways in the future and the more likely we are to start moving in an unstoppable direction towards Him.

Imagine it this way. Imagine that God's love is always raining down on us, like a spring rain in a freshly tilled farm field. Now, as you see the rain coming down in some places it saturates the ground and puddles up, while in other places it seeps away. Imagine our souls as that field, and God's grace, His love, as the rain. For some people, that rain just seeps away, but for others of us, the ground of our being is saturated and God's grace collects in puddles. As more grace rains down on us, it wells up inside us, and we need to decide whether we just soak in it, or whether we let it flow out from us. If we let God's love flow from us, it might first just trickle out and carve a tiny path in the soil. But if we keep responding to God's love in a consistent way, subsequent actions tend to follow the path carved by that little trickle and the path gets deeper and deeper. For the person who realizes God loves them, who accepts that love, who lets it well up inside and allows it to start impacting their actions, every response of theirs begins to build up a habit of how they respond to God and His ways. If the waters flow the same way every time, they carve out a deeper and deeper pathway, eventually becoming a canyon through which the waters of our response to God's grace in our lives can only flow one way. I like this image because it gets at the truth that the terrain is tilted so that the waters flow in our favor: the acceptance of God's grace tends to lead us to say "yes" to God and His ways more and more consistently and for our actions to flow more and more towards God.

If that analogy doesn't work for you, how about one from sports. Anyone truly successful in a sport has developed what is called muscle memory. Muscle memory is the ability to perform the same action over and over again in a consistent and optimal way. Muscle memory is achieved not through visualizing what success looks like, but in actually performing a simple action over and over again. In that repetition, that focus on the simple action, the body begins to act without thinking, and the best of the athlete comes out. Now, imagine that you're a golfer. Now I don't care if you've ever played golf before or not. I want you to imagine that you're going to swing a golf club and hit the small ball that lies at your feet. You might have to swing 100 times, but every once in a while, you hit the ball solidly. Everything about that shot feels good and looks good. You've suddenly been given grace to have hit a good golf shot, not to have seen someone else's good golf shot. And so the next time you hit the ball, you're going to try to repeat whatever it was that you did on the previous shot. Maybe you won't hit it perfectly the next time, but if you keep trying to repeat that previous good shot, you're more likely to hit another good one soon enough. And if you do this enough times, the more you allow past success to shape your present actions, the more you're likely to hit more and more good golf shots.

The best players not only live off their own experience of striking the ball, but they have teachers and manuals that they read, just like the Christian has Jesus as their teacher and the Scriptures and Tradition as their manuals to help us know what we should do. Great golfers practice over and over and over again so that their muscle memory becomes finely tuned and they can repeatedly hit great golf shots regardless of the external pressure of competition, or foul weather, or whether they're hitting out of a sand trap. Every time they hit the ball, they do it well because they have developed a pattern of action that works in every situation.

Try this muscle memory approach in your own life by picking a really simple action like always smiling at other people, or picking up trash when you see it, or letting others merge into traffic ahead of you. And see how it starts to become natural and how it leads you to do other nice things.

This concept of repeating actions until they become habitual is a concept that Thomas Aquinas talked about as "habitus," which is a fancy Latin word meaning "habit." The fact that our ability to say "yes" or "no" to God and His ways in the little things of life, prepares us for, and in fact guides us toward saying "yes" or "no" to God and His ways in subsequently bigger and bigger things in life until it becomes the pattern for all our responses to God.

But if this is so, if in fact God is always loving us, and if in fact, we are created so that we can recognize and accept that love, and if in fact, we are set up so that our responses to God's grace lead us to flow towards God, then why don't all people know God, let alone act in a grace filled manner?

Let me tell you a story about Chris. Chris was an atheist. Let me correct myself. Chris is an atheist. That actually reminds me of another epitaph in a Thurmont, Maryland, cemetery:

Here lies an Atheist
All dressed up
And no place to go.

Now before you begin to conjure up any impressions of Chris, let me clarify that Chris is a good man, and I respect him. He's a good man in the sense that he is very ethical, honest and giving. He acts from a desire to be authentic. And it is from his actions that I discern that he is a good man. I respect him because he is one of the smartest people I've ever known. And it's because Chris is a good man, and it's because I respect him, that he confounds me. Maybe it's not Chris directly who confounds me, but rather his lack of faith combined with his remarkable intellect and ability to reflect upon life.

What drives a man towards goodness if it is not God? What models a life, what gives it a vision, if it is not a vision of what God wants of us? Is the innate man, is the ungodly man, ultimately good, and if so, what can or does God add to the equation? Is innate goodness just the head start that God gives us? Is it just God's way of deliberately stacking the deck in our favor yet again?

Let me back up a minute. You see, Chris and I worked together for 8 years. And over those 8 years we had the occasion to go on lots of business trips together. On one particular trip to Boston, we got snowed in and trudged through the snow to dinner that night. Since we had no place to go, and perhaps since he was a beer aficionado and I was his willing understudy, we began to talk about God, or in his case, the lack thereof.

Chris was not able to accept Blaise Pascal's wager which says that we can either wager that God does or does not exist, and should live our life according to our wager. In the end, if God doesn't exist and we wagered that he did, we lose little. However, if God does exist and we wager that he didn't, we risk losing everything by spending eternity separated from God.

What it comes down to is the choice of saying "yes" to God and His ways or not. And another expression for choice is "Free Will." God wants us to love Him, for sure, but God wants us to *freely* love him, he didn't create a bunch of robots who can do nothing but love him. What I'm trying to say is He doesn't force us to love him. Forced love is unsatisfying, it isn't real love. The newspapers and perhaps our lives are full of examples where people have tried to coerce others to love them, even conjuring up false lives so as to make themselves into someone who is lovable. But it always is dissatisfying. Love requires freedom, especially the real freedom to choose not to love. Love, freely given, is the only true love. And God loves us so much that he allows us to be free to choose to love him back or not, completing the circle or leaving it open.

God is always and everywhere loving us. Our role in the story is what we do with it. Do we accept it or reject it?

Now I'm sure that if God came to us and explicitly told us that the good feelings we sometime have are His Love, His Grace, and that we could either explicitly vote "yes" or "no" about whether we wanted to keep feeling that Grace or not, that 100 percent of all people would say "yes." But the trouble is that God doesn't come to us explicitly – or at least not to all of us – and He certainly doesn't explicitly ask us this blatant question.

Instead God needs to be more subtle if he wants us to maintain our freedom. A great book I once read is called "Will and Spirit" by Gerard May. In it he talks about God's love being like undirected energy which we encounter at the pre-conscious level. It's always there and always available. Our role is to react to, to channel, that energy. Most often we channel it into superficial things, like the time-bound, self-seeking pleasures that pervade our culture, and most probably, ourselves. But the saint, the one who communes with God, is able to channel it to purer uses. They are able to channel God's energy into a personal energy to do boundless and unending acts of loving.

The trick is to get started in the first place. The trick is to catch the energy at least one time when it is at its source and to willingly direct it in a life-giving way, like hitting the golf ball the right way.

It's the habitus analogy all over again. What do we do with God's grace falling on us like rain from the sky? Do we let it saturate the ground of our being and well up or do we let it soak away?

I believe that the matter of faith for Chris is that his response to God's free-flowing and never-ending Grace was one of undirected response. Perhaps the ground of his being was becoming saturated and pre-consciously motivated his innate goodness, but it did not flow outward towards recognition of God.

For some reason I do have faith in God, maybe because I was given the subtle grace to recognize grace. What is it that has brought you to this place tonight rather than anywhere else in life? Why do you have faith? Why don't others in this world? Where is that river that runs through you? And where is it leading you?

Now I've talked about the fact that God is always and everywhere loving us. And I've talked about the fact that we are free to choose whether to love God back or not, but what I want to do now is emphasize how fundamentally this freedom is imbued in the created world.

My wife, Michelle, and I had a hard time conceiving. Michelle came from a family of 9 children, and I from a paltry family of 5 kids. Between the two of us, we were expecting at least 14 children in our family. But after 4 years of marriage, we were still childless and were feeling the heartache of not being able to achieve what we both longed for so desperately.

Well, I hope you can imagine our ecstasy when we found out that Michelle was pregnant. Finally our lives were encountering one of their goals and we were overjoyed at the prospect of becoming parents. I won't get into the whole story, but partway into her pregnancy, Michelle miscarried and we lost the child we were longing for so much.

As a result of this experience, Michelle and I gradually grappled with life's most difficult questions including the all time favorite: "why would an all loving God allow bad things to happen?" Theologians have grappled with this question, and so did Michelle and I. For me the answer is found in our free will. Just like God gave Chris the freedom to choose whether to respond to His love or not, so God has imbued freedom in His created world.

Which reminds me of a joke about freedom. A young boy had just gotten his driving permit. He asked his father, who was a minister, if he could have the freedom to use of the car whenever he wanted. His father said to him, "You can have free use of the car on the following conditions: you bring your grades up, study your Bible a little and get your hair cut and we'll talk about it."

After about a month the boy came back and again asked his father if they could discuss his freedom to use of the car whenever he wanted. His father said, "Son, I've been real proud of you. You have brought your grades up, you've studied your Bible diligently, but you didn't get your hair cut and that was one of the conditions of being free to use the car!"

The young man waited a moment and replied, "You know Dad, I've been thinking about that. You know, Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, Noah had long hair, and even Jesus had long hair...."

To which his father replied, "Yes, and they walked every where they went!"

Now that joke is an example of what's called *conditional* freedom. But God gives us *unconditional* freedom. In fact, God gives all things unconditional freedom. Let me explain.

In the first half of the 1900's, there lived a remarkable Jesuit theologian named Teilhard de Chardin, a priest and paleontologist whose life's work was to reconcile science and theology. Chardin's insight into God's creation echoes that of an earlier Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins. I don't know if you ever had the chance to read one of his most famous poems, but it starts out with "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." A later line in that poem reads "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things" Gerard Manley Hopkins and Teilhard de Chardin realized that everything has an external reality, which Chardin called the "without," and deep down everything has an internal reality, which he called the "within." We're well familiar with the "without" of things. This is the world of science. The study of physics and chemistry and biology all focus on the external aspect of things. But we also know that things have a "within" about them. Certainly we humans have an internal aspect that drives our behavior, we are aware of our own consciousness, our desires and our will. The energy of the "within" draws together the various external aspects of our material body (every atom, molecule, cell, organ and bodily system) into the unity of one being.

Certainly the Scriptures and our own experience say the same thing, just without the fancy words. There is something about us which includes and at the same time is more than our physical body and which identifies us uniquely as a special creation of God. God has been known to act in the realm of the without, but more often he can be encountered through his actions in the realm of the within.

Every *thing*, not just every person, has a within where God is constantly showering His love and guiding it towards the good for which it is suitable, whether it's an atom, an animal, or a person. And every within is tied together in its relationship to God. God could be called "the within of all within's", the center which supports the center of every thing.

Anyway, certainly our experience of the "without of all things" shows that there is unpredictability in everything that is – and in my mind, unpredictability implies freedom.

In the world of physics we have the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The notion that when you look at an electron, you can either know the direction it is moving or its location, but you cannot know both. In other words, you cannot determine where that electron will be next.

In the world of biology, we have the freedom found in cellular division which leads to biological diversity. The theory of evolution says that life forms evolve through mutation so there is a little unpredictability introduced with every new generation.

In the world of mathematics and meteorology, complexity theory teaches us that a butterfly freely flapping its wings on a hillside in Mongolia can cause air patterns that ultimately cause a snowstorm on the other side of the world, from which snow builds up on a mountain ridge, and ultimately causes an avalanche. And that sometimes people have made choices to ski on that mountain and the combination of their free choice along with the freedom of all things combines into unfortunate tragedy – just like the cells of our child freely dividing in my wife’s womb might do so abnormally and cause the uterus to reject it.

So why doesn’t God intercede in the realm of the without to stop such tragedy? Because God sees freedom as so essential to being able to love, that he has imbued it in all things and is reticent to stand in its way. Got it? Freedom is an inherent part of how God created what he created. For without freedom, love cannot exist. And without love, God cannot call the things he creates “good.”

So as a result of this little tragedy in our lives, I came to a fuller understanding that freedom is part of God’s plan for everything in His created world, and that that loving gift of freedom has negative consequences to be sure, but consequences which never outweigh the goodness of that freedom – the freedom to choose whether to say “yes” to God and His ways or not.

And this little tragedy also called me to seek better understanding of what happened to that tiny soul that was taken from us. What happened to our baby? And that brings me to what I believe is the most beautiful teaching of the Catholic Church next to the teaching that God is Love, namely the Teaching of the Definitive Encounter.

See, I could only make sense out of the loss of our first child with the thought that God loved them so much that He just couldn’t wait for them to be with Him and so he brought our child up to heaven even before we got to know their beautiful soul. But in the back of my mind, I had to be sure that our child was indeed in heaven. And here’s how I know.

First, we do not make decisions in life with full knowledge or understanding of what we’re doing – we make decisions every day without all the facts. How many of us have listened to someone’s story, made up our mind about what we should do, and then talked to another person, heard their part of the story, and totally reversed our decision about what we should do? In most cases in life, we don’t hear all the sides of the story. We don’t have all the knowledge we need to choose the right thing.

Even more so, we don’t even really know who we are. Don’t we all create little myths about ourselves that we start to believe? There are all sorts of little nuances we’ve added to our memories of ourselves that never really happened. We do this almost naturally so that the memory is more savory. But after a while, we actually begin to believe that our revised story is what really happened. Think about it. Isn’t it true? Aren’t there memories that we hold to be true which didn’t actually happen exactly the way we remember it. And odds are, the little variances in the memory serve to elevate our own opinion of ourselves.

Second, on top of not having full knowledge, we're not always free to do what we should. Modern psychology has shown us that despite everything I just said about how freedom is imbued in all things, we are not *fully* free in our lives. For instance, we always do what we want to do. Now we can probably think of lots of situations in our lives where we have done something we *didn't* want to do – something that might have been painful or unpalatable, something that rubbed us the wrong way. But we did that thing because there was some larger thing that we wanted: maybe the happiness of another, or maybe to avoid conflict, or maybe something larger in our life. But we always do what we want to do no matter what. I won't get into a psychoanalysis of our preconscious minds, so just take my word on this point.

Now, our wants are formed by a number of factors, including but not limited to, what our mothers put into their bodies when we were in the womb, the upbringing we had as children, the knowledge we were presented in school, and the society we live in. As a result, we are not fully free to make decisions because we've been put into environments, without our choice, which impact our ability to know what we should want. Do any of you for a moment think you'd be the same person you are today if you were born in a different family or culture or time? Our environment impacts who we are.

So, to summarize, we don't even know ourselves as we really are, let alone do we know the right way to act in every situation! And, while we may have been created as free, the effects of the free choices of other people impact our freedom.

The teaching of the Definitive Encounter recognizes this, and realizes that as a result of our limited knowledge and freedom that we are not fully responsible for every behavior of ours on earth. However, it says that at the moment of our death, we will finally be given full knowledge of ourselves, full freedom to choose our response, and finally, full responsibility for our choices. And we will have responsibility for one choice and one choice only – whether we say “yes” or “no” to God and His ways for all eternity. This teaching was first formulated by Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, when he says “Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.” It was further supported by Aquinas' “habitus” when he talked about how our “habit” of saying “yes” or “no” to God and His ways in the little things of life impacts our ability to say “yes” or “no” to God and His ways in the big things in life, especially at the final judgment. And it was clarified by Ladislaus Boros in the 1930's and became an accepted teaching of the Church in the 1940s.

It sounds so easy, right? Do whatever you want here on earth, go up to God, say “yes God, I want heaven” and in you go. Right? Well, not quite. See, at that moment of definitive encounter, we are brought to full knowledge not only of who we are, but of who God wanted us to be. We glimpse the potential of who we could have been if we'd have done everything the way God wanted us to and the amazing impact we could have had on things if we had, and we see how far we fell short of the mark. We see all the hurts we caused others, the pain we caused God, and the damage we did to ourselves. The pain associated with this can be very intense. In fact, its intensity is relative to how far short of the mark we fell. And that pain is what we call Purgatory.

Now let me pause for a moment on this topic, because this is probably a different view of Purgatory from that which you were taught. Catholics have always believed in Purgatory, but you need to know what our belief about Purgatory says. Basically, our Tradition says that there will be appropriate compensation for our sins, a purification, before we can enter heaven and that the name we have given this state of compensation is called Purgatory. Now, to help make sense of this teaching, creative minds throughout history have used images of this world to describe the realities of the next world. But the images they used were so vivid and understandable that they sometimes became more memorable than the theology they tried to represent. The Definitive Encounter does not contradict the Church's teaching of Purgatory, it simply says that since God is eternal, He is outside of time, that a full encounter with God is outside of time, and so using earthly notions like that of being in Purgatory for some set amount of time makes no sense. Instead, that pain in all its intensity is felt in a single instant.

Now, despite this pain of realizing how far we fell short of the mark, despite its intensity, our habit of answering God can help us out. It's kind of like the golf example: great golfers strive to create muscle memory so that they can perform consistently regardless of the lie of their ball, the weather conditions, and the external pressures they're under. Our habits can carry us through. So if we developed a habit of saying "yes" to God and His ways in our life on earth, then that habit might help us say "yes" even through the pain and pressure we feel.

Now there's one more powerful insight in this teaching. The beautiful thing about our prayers for others is that since God is in eternity, he is outside of time. And since the Definitive Encounter is a full encounter with God, it too is outside of time. That means that all the prayers that have ever been said for that person or ever *will* be said for that person, are gathered up into one instant and are brought before the person, helping to counteract their pain. All those prayers help them realize the love that people have for them, and this blast of love helps to counteract the painful realization of all the hurt they caused, and helps them say "yes" to God and His ways for ever.

Padre Pio was a Capuchin monk who was recently canonized as a saint. You may remember him as the priest who had stigmata, the bleeding from his hands like Jesus. One day, his doctor came into his cell, and Padre Pio got up and said "Please excuse me, I was saying some prayers for my grandfather." The doctor said "But you told me that he was already in heaven." "That is so," said Padre Pio, "but the prayers that I have *now* said for him and shall *yet* say for him have already helped him to get there."

Let me summarize where we've gotten to, because we've gone through a lot.

- First, God is always loving us regardless of what we do or don't do. In fact, God created us in his loving, relation seeking image.
- Next, we have freedom in how we respond to that love.
- Next, this freedom is so deeply imbued in God's created goodness, the world, that it sometimes causes bad things to happen, which never outweigh the good caused by having that freedom.
- Next, the way we freely choose to respond to God and His ways in the *little* things in life, creates a habitual way of responding which will influence how we respond to God and His ways in the *big* things in life and how much we become the person God envisioned we'd be when He created us.

- And finally, that the biggest response to God, the acceptance or rejection of his eternal presence in Heaven,
 - First, is impacted by that habit of how we responded to God on earth,
 - Second, includes a pain that is proportionate to how far we fell short of the mark of becoming the person God wanted us to be
 - and finally, is assisted by the prayers of people for us throughout all time.

That's a lot of stuff, so let me put it into perspective.

- What's going to happen to my atheist friend, Chris, at the Definitive Encounter? Well, my hope is, that when he is given full knowledge, freedom and responsibility, he might say "God, I never allowed myself to know you the way you wanted me to. But my actions in life were consistent with the call to love that you challenge all people with. And so, even though I feel intensely the pain of how I fell short of the mark, the loving prayers Greg said for me, and others have said for me, and my habitual way of acting allows me to say "yes" to your offer of eternal love.
- My unborn child has a much easier go of it. My hope is that they might say "God, I never had a chance to know you as much as my parents did, and I never got to develop much of a habit in terms of responding to your constant offer of love, but now that I have full knowledge, freedom and responsibility, I can think of no other way to respond to your love other than to eternally say "yes" to you and your ways."
- And my hope is that *we* might have a positive experience. We might say "God, I was graced to know your love here on earth, and I feel deeply the pain I caused others, and especially You, by not acting as you wanted me to act and not fully becoming the person you desired that I become. But I have developed a general pattern of saying "yes" to You and Your ways, and the prayers of my loved ones give me confidence at this moment, so I say "yes" to the offer to be with you forever.

My prayer for you tonight is that you will let the rain of God's loving grace saturate the ground of your being. I pray that it might well up into a puddle. And I pray that you don't hold it all within. I pray that you can tear down the dams, the dikes, the locks that hold the those waters inside of you, and let the waters of love flood every corner of your life. I pray that your actions of saying "yes" to God and His ways in response to His grace might cause it to flow out into the world and carve a little path in the ground. I pray that you might have the grace to direct your response to God's love so consistently that it carves out a deeper and deeper pathway for those waters, eventually carving a canyon in which the water can only flow one way, so that you cannot help but say "Yes" to God and His ways in every action from this point until that day you definitively encounter God.

May you know that God is always loving you and may know that God is everywhere gracing you.