

Some years ago a couple invited me to stay at their vacation home. A comfortable home sited in a clearing in a lush forest, it was a beautiful place in a beautiful place, everything one could want. Edenic, you might say. My friends never would have accepted payment so I was determined to be the best guest I could be and leave no trace of my stay.

My last day there, I dutifully cleaned up the kitchen, bathroom, and living room, laundered the linens and remade the bed, collected my things... and knocked over a beautiful glass candlestick that had been sitting on an out-of-the-way shelf, almost hidden, certainly unobtrusive and inoffensive. Shocked, I couldn't believe my carelessness. There was no fixing the candlestick. It was no longer any use to anyone, but I couldn't bear to throw it away, so I took it home with me.

Although I had knocked over a fragile item, I was the one who had fallen, and there was no going back. What was I going to tell my friends? They had entrusted me with something precious, I had destroyed a piece of it, and I couldn't undo what I had done.

God found the world to be in a similar situation. God created a perfect home for humanity, where we would be happy and free and want for nothing. All God asked of us was not to cross one reasonable boundary, not to break one very simple rule. The Bible doesn't say how much time passed before sin entered the world, but on the page, it comes in the very next chapter.

The new status quo of sin and brokenness could not endure, for it was an affront to God. The world God had made and given us was heading in a direction God had not intended. Humanity owed everything to God, perfect obedience and total devotion. Not only could we not pay what we owed, we kept sinning, kept falling further into debt.

Ignoring the problem, saying that humanity was just fine, would have been a lie; not an option for the God of truth. God could have chosen to wipe out Creation and start over, and the Flood suggests that was a real option for God. But in the end, God chose a more excellent way, and showed that he is a God not only of truth, but also of grace.

When I got home from that nearly-perfect vacation, I stopped into an antique shop I'd never visited before. They had exactly one glass candlestick for sale. It was more beautiful than the one I'd broken and, to my astonishment, it was on sale. Fifty percent off. What a deal! I didn't hesitate to purchase it, but I was still anxious about presenting it to my friends, which would inevitably entail confessing my sin. But their eyes lit up when they saw the new candlestick, they called it an heirloom, and their delight at the transformation was so complete that my mistake, which had set the whole process in motion, was completely and utterly forgotten. We were closer after the episode than before it. But there are two key differences I have to highlight.

The key difference between the candlestick and the cross is that while I did possess the ability to make that one tiny situation right again, the cross is God's response to the fact that humanity could never save itself from sin. Only the death of the

one who is both fully human and fully God, the one whose complete lack of sin allowed him to take all the sin of the world upon himself, only the death of the Christ could bring sufficient grace to the world to free humanity from the entire crushing burden of its sin.

The key difference between relationships between human beings and relationships between people and God is that even gracious people like the couple who forgave me aren't perfect. St. John's telling of the Passion makes this abundantly clear, highlighting the sinfulness of both Jesus's enemies and Jesus's disciples, as represented by St. Peter. St. John projected the conflict that led to the separation between his community and the established Jewish community out of which it grew back onto the Passion narrative.

If we are going to understand the story at the heart of our faith, we must take care to remember that when St. John speaks of "the Jews," in a negative way, he is referring to a then-fresh traumatic experience with a very specific Jewish subgroup at a particular place and time, for of course Jesus himself, and his friends and allies, were all Jewish, too. The passion text itself has enough bitter and horrifying irony, but humanity has added more by twisting the story into a pretext for anti-Jewish violence. Christians who have done that were ignoring both history and the very point of the story, which is that love, grace, and mercy are the way of God, and for that they will have to explain themselves to our Jewish Lord who has overcome the world.

Christ's goodness and love expressed on the Cross far exceeds the debt of human sin, giving greater glory to God than any other human's righteousness or sacrifice. The greatness of Christ's sacrifice is so much greater than human sin that we are able to experience a closer intimacy with God in our pretty little church than Adam and Eve could have experienced in the vast splendor of Eden.

Not long from now we will receive the Body our Lord Jesus Christ, broken for us. Receive him in faith, with thanksgiving. Thank God that God chose the way of grace instead of the way of punishment. Thank God that we can meet him in forgiveness, that sin and death have lost their power, and nothing can separate us from the love of God. Thank God that we have been restored to wholeness by the God who did what we never could, the God who paid full price.