

Unconditional love is all too rare in life. To know someone loves you absolutely is breathtaking. On their wedding day couples say to each other, "I will love you and honor you all the days of my life." It's an astonishing promise. I recently visited an elderly man in the hospital. He told me his wife had been bound to a wheelchair for years, and two other family members are now helping her in and out of the chair. I smiled, "I'll bet she's anxious to get you home." And then he cried, "She said, 'I'd rather have one of you helping me than two of them.'" Her handicap revealed to both of them that the love they promised on their wedding day was unconditional.

Most of us have some experience of this kind of loving--a relationship goes along surprisingly well, and then you begin to doubt. "If my friend ever finds out what I did, is our relationship over?" There's some dark secret, an old injury, a foolish choice, fear that your friend will find out, and your friendship will never be the same. You take the risk, you tell, then you ask, "Can you still love me?" You hear, "Yes," and you know as if for the first time how strong your love is. There wells up inside you a desire to respond, a desire to love even more.

This is God's kind of love, unconditional love. It's humbling, frustrating sometimes how persistent God can be in his pursuit of us. Today's Gospel is a parable of the love of God, how love makes God call us, and how love makes us respond. A king gave a banquet, called his friends to come, but they said no. He set the table, called them again, they still said no. The king said, "Enough of this. Forget the guest list. Call everyone." Then they had themselves a party.

Everyone is eligible for the kingdom of God. God's love is so broad he calls us all, and calls us unconditionally. Jesus died on the cross to invite everyone to heaven. Not a few, not just many, everyone gets the invitation. Everyone is eligible, you need not hold a raffle ticket. No matter the dark secrets, no matter the old injuries, the foolish choices. God's call goes to everyone. This is one reason we baptize infants in the Catholic Church, we know God's call is so universal it goes even to children. We do not have to earn God's love; it's already there.

Now, such a call, such loving, elicits a response. Do I answer back? If so, how? And how well?

We're beginning a season of renewal in the parish. It starts with a basic theme: God loves you. Not just you in the plural, you in the singular, God loves you personally, unconditionally. The RENEW program helps us discern, "Do I answer back? If so, how? And how well?"

We do not enter this season thinking we have to convince God to love us more. We never do that on any spiritual journey; we don't have to convince him with our penance during Lent, we don't have to convince him with our prayers for the needy. Our prayers and our penance are always a response. We enter this season assured of how much God loves St. Regis parish, and there wells up inside us a desire to respond, a desire to love even more.