

*Based on Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
Second Sunday in Lent 2023*

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

One of my guilty pleasures is reading advice columnists. Undoubtedly because it can sometimes make me feel better about whatever craziness is happening in my own life, but also just because they offer a fascinating insight into how other people think. A recurring issue in several of these columns concerns thank-you cards. Apparently, this custom is on the decline and many people are *very* unhappy about it.

On one hand, I totally understand that people might want to know whether or not a gift sent by mail or some other long-distance delivery service has arrived. I've lived away from where I grew up for my entire adult life and this has been something that I've both wanted to know for boxes I have sent and as something I've wanted to reassure my family about when I've received packages from them. I confess, that we never did this by thank-you card but over the phone (and later by email and text).

But the gist of the complaints I read in Dear Abby and elsewhere is just concern over the efficacy of the Post Office or UPS. What they seem to desire is gratitude. In fact, I would go so far as to say that in the minds of people who complain about this sort of thing, they seem to think they have laid a claim on whomever they have gifted; they seem to feel as though they have "bought" some gratitude and are irked that they have been cheated out of their purchase.

In my mind, these people have no idea what a “gift” is. A gift is a free-will offering without expectations. It is a material bit of hope cast out into the world. With luck the recipient will receive it with joy, but there’s no obligation on their part to do so.

God’s love for us is a gift, freely given by God who surely hopes that all of us receive this gift with joy. But it isn’t some kind of quid-pro-quo arrangement where God does things for us because we followed the rules well or acted piously enough. We cannot earn God’s love by the religious equivalent of sending thank-you cards. God’s love is freely and joyously given to all with only the hope that we will recognize its value and be eager to pass it along to those we meet.