

The people of Israel became impatient and unhappy in the wilderness
And they grumbled, they complained to Moses,
“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this wilderness?
For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food – this
mana.”

They just did not like the way God was handling things.
And so to punish them for their unfaithful, ungrateful grumbling,
God sent poisonous snakes to help them see the error of their ways, and to
bring them to repentance.

That is what Paul is talking about in the reading we just heard,
That they and all of us who deny the goodness, mercy and grace of God are
dying – that we are snake bit, if you will.

But that, also like the Israelites, when we turn to the One who is lifted up – turn
to Christ – we too will all be saved by the love and the grace of God.

That is what Jesus is explaining to sincere but still unconvinced Nicodemus.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes – everyone looks to Christ - who follows him -
may not perish from the snakebite of sin – the poison of unfaith and
ingratitude –

But instead of death may have everlasting life.

I suppose I have been an ungrateful grumbler much of my life.

Certainly at least as far back as high school.

My favorite teacher there and then was Mrs. Nell Grant.

She is probably my favorite teacher of all times.

She tried her best to teach English to the Junior and Senior classes of
Demopolis High School, and, with a few notable holdouts, was largely very
successful.

Mrs. Grant was one of those natural teachers, effective and compelling.

She convinced us that English was important for the state of our souls, for our
mental health and for our future welfare.

She gave us a respect for language and a love of literature.

She had that quality that all truly great teachers and leaders have.

She made you want to perform for her, to please her.

Most of us wanted to do our very best work for Mrs. Grant, because we knew that she not only cared deeply about her subject, but also she cared about you, about the private depths of your being that you usually kept hidden. You knew that she would understand and accept and appreciate the real, true you.

Not surprisingly, there was another element for me.

Even though she was an old married lady in her late 30's,

I was in love with Mrs. Grant.

So I used the only means at my disposal to express that love.

I did my very best work for her.

I poured out my soul in every theme.

Each book report was a labor of love.

Mrs. Grant responded by being very affirming in her comments – written and verbal – and always on every test and every paper, I always received an “A.”

Most of my classmates got “C’s” at best.

And so I had no doubt that I was very special to Mrs. Grant.

I assumed that she, like I, was using the only means available to her to let me know that my love for her was warmly, amply reciprocated.

So when Mrs. Grant assigned our final paper before graduation – a book report on Melville’s *Moby Dick* – I knew that this was my last and best opportunity to write her my *magnum opus*.

She explained that this was not to be just another book report, but that we were to pretend that we were already in college (as nearly all of us in our class of fifty would be that fall).

We were to make an effort to do college level work, using all the resources and guidelines she had provided for us.

And the paper was to count for one-third of our semester grade.

Two weeks later, as I handed in my masterpiece, with the pretentious title, “The Great White Whale; Symbol and Metaphor,” there was not a cloud in my sky.

Graduation was only two weeks away.

Our entire class was about to go on the traditional graduation trip to Washington, D.C. and New York City, for which we had been raising money since Junior High.

I had received an academic scholarship to a highly regarded liberal arts college, which also had a reputation as a pretty good party school.

Life was sweet as I placed my twelve-page paper in Mrs. Grant's lovely hand, certain that she would consider it the finest fruit of her teaching career, and, of course, she would tell me so, after she had closely, avidly and lovingly read it. When she had everyone's assignment, she announced,

"I know you all worked very hard on this paper, that you put a great deal into it, and I hope you got a great deal out of it.

Now as my graduation present to you, I am going to give everyone a "100" on your paper.

You may pick them up after class."

Cheers, grins and applause broke out all over the classroom.

All, that is, except for Kathryn and me, Mrs. Grant's two consistent "A" students.

We looked at each other in confused disbelief.

Kathryn shrugged and smiled.

I sat there stunned, disappointed and betrayed.

Mrs. Grant, my mentor, my muse and the object of my desire, was not even going to read my great work.

All my effort had been in vain.

My best friend Billy had not even read the Cliff Notes.

Now he was going to receive a totally undeserved "100."

I was to be lumped in with Billy and all the rest.

It was not fair!

I could not stand it or understand it, and I would not pretend that I could.

When class was finally over and all the others had retrieved their papers, I gathered up my books and descended on Mrs. Grant like a storm cloud.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked, as I stood at her desk.

At least she had noticed.

"How could you do that?" I asked, my voice disconcertingly rising an octave.

"How could you give everyone the same grade?

Some of them didn't even read the book."

The complaints and the grumblings tumbled out of my mouth.

"I spent a lot of time on that damn paper!

I worked really hard on it.

It's really good, and I really deserve a better grade than they do."

I paused for breath.

"I earned it!"

I snatched up my paper lying alone on her desk and turned to leave, but Mrs. Grant stood up, took my arm and turned me to face her.

"You're getting "100," she said.

“You can’t do any better than perfect.

Just try to be happy for the rest of your class.

Most of them have never gotten “100” on anything, and may never again.

That grade will help them all.”

A small smile tilted up one corner of her full lips.

“Except for Kathryn, of course. And you.”

She continued, her hand still on my sleeve.

“This doesn’t hurt you one bit, and you’ve had the pleasure of reading one of the greatest books ever written in the English language.

You have a paper ready for when you get to college.

At the very least you can use it for a guide.

“So what’s wrong with that?” she asked and smiled.

“What’s wrong with it is that it’s not fair,” I responded in a voice with an embarrassing quaver.

“You’re not being fair!”

“Look,” she said, “when you get to be the teacher, you can be fair.”

She was still holding my arm and pulled me a little closer.

“Leave me your paper. I want to read it,” she said.

“I’ll give you my corrections and comments just as always.

But don’t expect more than 100.”

I dropped the paper on her desk and turned away quickly, hoping that she would not see the tear that, like my voice, was betraying me.

I was not quick enough, however, to avoid the tiny kiss of grace that she somehow managed to unfairly place on my undeserving check.

It is usually so much easier for most of us to acknowledge, confess and repent of our warm sins,

Than it is to even recognize those cold, prideful sins that take all the joy out of our lives,

The ingratitude and the lack of love for one another that separate us from our Father and from each other,

and that can eventually kill our souls as surely as the bite of a timber rattler can kill our bodies.

In our lives, in our parish, in our society,

we expect our work to be properly rewarded,

we insist on fairness and “just desserts,”
and we often resent it when “good things happen to bad people” in this world
and that possibility in the next.

A professor/theologian friend of mine wrote this:

“The litmus test of day-to-day Christianity may very well be our capacity to
rejoice in the good things God does in the lives of others, even and especially
the unworthy, undeserving ones.”

I still grumble and complain from time to time. Of course I do.

There are still times when I am not pleased with the way God is handling
things.

I still often want things to be fair, which means to my advantage, or simply “my
way.”

But now having experienced the grace and the love of God,

I finally realize how desperately I needed Mrs. Grant’s wonderful gifts to me
that day, the life lessons and the kiss.

And finally I can rejoice that my friend Billy got his “100” too.

Turning to Mrs. Grant may not have given me everlasting life,

But it certainly set me farther along that holy path.

It helped me understand that when Jesus is lifted up,

The entire world can look to him, and by grace be saved.

“For God so loved the world.”

May our gracious God help us in this season of penitence and repentance

to leave our grumbling and our unfaith,

And to turn to Jesus Christ uplifted

and be saved by his kiss of Grace.

The love of God and the Grace of God is the antidote

to the snakebite poison of sin - the antidote freely and equally given,

even to those who have not even read the Cliff Notes.

And it is our attitude of gratitude that makes it possible to receive that grace
and love,

And it is the outward and visible sign that we have.

Because, like it or not, Jesus gives us all “100.”