

Romans 5:12-19; Psalm 32; Matthew 4:1-11

February 22, 2026

Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

What would bring joy to your soul? The restored relationship with an estranged family member or reconnection with a long-lost friend? Would you feel joy at the knowledge that a health issue has been resolved or that God is with you in your darkest hour? Would you experience deep joy if you were told all your (monetary, moral, spiritual) debts were forgiven?

This is what the author of Psalm 32 is talking about. The Psalmist explodes with joy at the news that he's been relieved of any guilt, and his heart is alight with gratitude:

Happy (*blessed*) are they whose transgressions are forgiven,
and whose sin is put away!

Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt,
and in whose spirit there is no guile!

The writer acknowledges his sinfulness and celebrates the grace God extends to him. He encourages all of us to follow his counsel and turn to God with heartfelt confession. When that happens, God is ready to love the sinner into wholeness and guide the troubled soul into healing. But there is need for cooperation and understanding on the side of the sinner who is restored to truthfulness of heart, to the righteousness of the Lord.

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Paul develops further the theme. His Letter to the Romans can be challenging to understand, but its central message becomes clearer when simplified. The letter presents the idea that Adam, the first man, representing all of humanity, fell into spiritual bankruptcy. The consequences affected everyone. However, another man, Jesus, also representing all of humanity, stepped in and paid off this debt, filling in the abyss that separated us from God. Through Jesus, the debt was settled, offering redemption to everyone. That's grace.

But the thought that Jesus bridged the gulf separating us from God does not leave us without the opportunity to show gratitude and the desire to strengthen our newly found relationship. If we left all the salvific heavy lifting to God, and were simply carried into paradise, we wouldn't have any self-respecting agency and wouldn't be able to engage in creative cooperation.

God, who is Love, finds existence and reveals the Divine Energy in relationship. God is in the measure God is in creative relationship with God's creature. God would not be satisfied with a passive relationship. Indeed, without an outburst of Love, we wouldn't have God. Consequently, we wouldn't have creation or humanity.

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The whole life experience of Jesus has been one of calling people into communion with God. He has made his life mission to bring us to unity with God and one another. By letting God's Word dwell in us, by giving that Word tangible flesh, by fulfilling his commandments, by loving as he has demonstrated, we participate actively in our personal transformation and the transformation of the world. The path or Way he has opened before us allows us to glorify, love and worship God. That love creates us and gives us meaning and purpose. Short of that unity, we are scattered and isolated.

The Resurrection of Jesus is the triumph of that unifying love and through faith we are called to be part of that. Baptism in the Spirit seals all that.

But the journey is not without sacrifice. For Easter to be the triumph of Love it needs to go through the cross: there is no life without death, no love without surrender. If we are not actively engaged in loving others, life becomes boring, we put ourselves to sleep, we insulate ourselves from people's challenges, from their pain. When we do not engage in love, we deprive ourselves of the energy to be and to become, we rob ourselves of our creative abilities, and we muffle our expressive nature. We narcotize ourselves into a superficial existence and apathy, risking a close approach to nihilism.

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Theologian Ilia Delio reminds us:

“Jesus began his public ministry with a clear plea for conversion, to change our way we think about things, to unlearn the habits that keep us separate and isolated, to settle down in our own skin...Anything that opposes the law of love opposes the work of God.”¹

We are at the beginning of Lent. It is easy to go through it untouched: just another season of the Church; different Scriptural themes, same Sundays. Routine may help us in creating healthy habits, but mindless routine may also dull us into passive religious observers and not attentive participants in the spiritual drama developing before us.

Jesus is approaching Jerusalem where he will undergo the suffering of his passion and cruel death. We may ignore the disciplines of Lent (pray, keep the fast, give alms) and the liturgical rituals that the Church suggests observing for our piety and spiritual growth (foot washing on Holy Thursday and a prayer at the foot of the cross on Good Friday). We may skip the gory parts of his crucifixion and simply show up on Easter morning because such is our tradition. But what will

¹ Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, p.183

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be changed in us? How will we deepen our appreciation of what Jesus underwent to lead us to the Father?

The 40 days of Lent are an invitation to connect in prayer with God and stand with those treated with cruelty. Lent calls us to fast so we can see more clearly how we can participate in justice-making. It also invites us to untangle ourselves from the self-harm of apathy and indifference and to learn to give ourselves away for the sake of love.

I invite you to pray silently with me a prayer known as a Lenten Prayer by Fr. Henri Nouwen:

"O Lord, how often have we lived through Lent without paying much attention? But how can we ever really celebrate Easter without observing Lent? How can we rejoice fully in your resurrection when we have avoided participating in your death? There is so much in us that needs to die: false attachments, anger and greed, impatience and stinginess. O Lord, we are self-centered, concerned about ourselves, our career, our future, our names... Often we even feel that we try to use you for our own advantage. How preposterous, how sad! But yes, Lord, we know it is true. O Lord, make this

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Lenten season different from the other ones. Let us find you again. Amen."²

² <https://uscatholic.org/blog/lent-day-1-henri-nouwen/>