

There is a story about a mountaineer from West Virginia who falls in love with the beautiful daughter of the town preacher. The gruff and tough man looks deeply into the eyes of the preacher's daughter one evening and says, *'I love you.'*

It takes more courage for him to say those simple words than he has ever had to muster for anything else he has ever done. Minutes pass in silence and then the preacher's daughter responds, *'I love you, too.'*

The tough mountaineer says nothing else except, *'Good night.'* Then he goes home, gets ready for bed and prays, *'God, I ain't got nothin' against nobody.'*

When we open to **love**, we can't limit or pick and choose who we **love**. It is the one instance in which it is **all or nothing**. Yet, most of us can't **love** all of the time. We, rather, fall into **love** and then fall out of **love**. That is, we **live the image of God** - who is **love** - and we also **fall short of living the likeness of God**.

One reason for this **falling short** is because we normally operate under the **assumption** that we are **expected to make something** of ourselves. We make something of ourselves by **achieving** or **ascending**. Business, school, and religion are seen almost exclusive from the perspective that we are meant to **achieve** or **ascend** (e.g. *'we have to get to heaven'*).

The movement **upward** seems to come naturally to us because we **practice ascending** nearly each moment of our lives. The difficulty happens when we attempt to apply this tendency to **spirituality**. It is the

primary reason that the **crucifixion** is such a scandal.. until we manage - of course - to **interpret** the **crucifixion** and use the language of **ascension** to describe it too (e.g. Jesus **sacrifices** himself to **save** us).

Jesus also seems to be using the language of **achievement** or **ascension** in today's **Gospel** story from **John**. He talks about the **son of man** being '**lifted up**'. The reference, however, isn't of **ascend**. Rather is the language of **descend**. He is referring to the **seraph serpent** that is mounted on a pole to **heal** people when they **forget** that they are **created in love** and begin to live in a different. It is like a **snake bite** - the **Scriptures** say - that **poisons** us.

Jesus - and all true spiritual leaders - uses the language of **descent** - the **willingness** to **observe** that we are not **self-sufficient** - whenever they speak about **spirituality**. Our second reading from **Ephesians** picks up on this language when we are reminded: *'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast. For we are [God's] handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.'*