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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
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Lectionary Year C: John 1:1-18

There are certain things that we're better off not advertising. I would think that, were any of us ever to win the lottery, we would want to keep a low profile for a while afterwards -- lest we attract attention from people looking for favors, or resentment from compulsive gamblers who've never won much of anything. Something like the lottery, too, calls to mind things that we really don't deserve; for example, how hard does a lottery winner have to work in order to receive that money? The strenuous exercise of choosing numbers surely must exhaust even the hardest-working person, right?

Wrong.

Speaking personally, I'm not much of a gambler, but on the rare occasions when I do place a wager, I don't expect to win, and when I win something, it's a nice little unexpected bonus that puts a few extra bucks in my pocket. A statistician will tell you that when a bet is placed on something where the outcome is purely a matter of chance, you cannot (and should not) rely on the outcome favoring you. And if you have a lick of common sense, you wouldn't need a statistician to tell you that!

Back in North Dakota, a hard-core pull tab player told me that, if you were to buy every pull tab in any given machine in town, the payout would be seventy-eight percent. I remember thinking that I

could've replaced those machines with myself and given everyone who gave me a hundred dollars seventy-eight dollars in return, but, for whatever reason, I didn't think the idea would catch on...

But, casual pull tab players who would win big when the hard core player was right next to them losing hundreds of dollars were al-  
ways the object of resentment thereafter. (Remember what I said about keeping a low profile after winning the lottery!)

I still can't see, though, how one can justify one's sense of entitlement to win at a game of chance. Just because you've blown the most money somehow means that you deserve to win even when the odds are always against you? As you might guess, I'm not really sympathetic to that kind of logic.

I'm of the persuasion that thinks that if you didn't work for it, you don't deserve it. In other words, playing pull tabs or choosing lottery numbers is not work. Christmas gifts might be a little different; if you get something nice from a spouse, family member, or friend who sees all you do and wants you to be happy, that gift may indeed be well-deserved. In the Church, however, we're pretty cautious about how we use language of entitlement, and we ask questions like "Do we deserve to be saved because of our good works?"

I trust we remember that the answer to that is a firm "No!"

At yesterday's Christmas morning service, I focused on the appointed Gospel text, which was John, chapter 1, just like it is today. But yesterday's text stopped at verse 14, while this morn-

ing's text adds verses 15 through 18, so instead of rehashing many of yesterday's reflections on "the Word" in John's Gospel, we'll focus on some key verses from the tail end of today's text.

Right away, we can see John introducing the concept of grace, which he contrasts with the Old Testament concept of law. Law, as you may know, is that which God gave Moses to govern and to regulate the behavior of the Israelites. The law was good, but God's people couldn't save themselves by way of the law. They needed grace, which is what God offered humanity in Jesus Christ.

Law is a pretty easy concept to grasp -- do this, don't do that, and if you do something you shouldn't do, you can expect punishment. Grace, on the other hand, is rather murky. Is it a "get out of jail free" card? Sort of, but, because grace doesn't completely eradicate the law, you can't get away with murder. Thus, we speak of grace more frequently in the theological realm instead of the civil realm. Grace, theologically speaking, is the wholly undeserved and freely given pardon for sin that God offers to all of his children. As God's children, we don't deserve grace, we don't earn grace -- this is winning a lottery for which we didn't even have to pick numbers!

Grace, too, is more extraordinary and more lavish than we could ever imagine. In John's Gospel, we read, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (1:16). Thinking again of Christmas gifts, we look to Christ and what he was born into this world to do; he gave us the greatest gift of all -- salvation. By God's grace, and grace-upon-grace, we are saved from the sin that

would've otherwise held us captive forever. Generation after generation proved that God's people were incapable of saving themselves, and so God sent Jesus Christ to repair the breach that had broken humanity's relationship with God. That repair itself is sure evidence of God's grace.

And yes, there are certain things that we're better off not advertising; an exception to this rule, however, is God's grace in Jesus Christ. One of the big reasons why the Gospels were written was to ensure that the good news got out, and we, in effect, are the legacy of the Evangelists -- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Yes, we have received something in God's grace that we didn't deserve, but we are most certainly free to tell others about it.

If it were the case that we did deserve grace, it wouldn't be grace...it would be more like remuneration, and something tells me God doesn't think as transactionally as we do. All God hears is our plea for forgiveness, and, with that plea, he lavishes us with his grace once again.

What are the chances that God would be so good to us? Here's where any sort of comparison to the lottery would break down. We don't choose the right numbers and then "win" God's grace. Instead, God chooses us and makes us his own, and we don't have much say in the matter, apart from a simple confession of "Yes, God, I believe."

Lastly, most pursuits of this life -- including gambling -- have measures such as "success" and "failure." Even ABC's Wide World of Sports made "the thrill of victory" and "the agony of defeat" a

centerpiece of its marketing! But thanks to God's grace, and his grace-upon-grace, we will never be measured by him in terms of "success" and "failure." You can win the lottery, but you can never win God's favor.

You can only receive it.

So, anytime things aren't going well for you -- maybe you're "down on your luck" -- remember that there is always God's grace, which is infinitely greater than any success or failure you could ever experience on this earth. From there, you can make your plea to God, and let the amendment of your life begin.

Amen.