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**By the Rev. Mary Norton**

I haven't looked back to check how many times I have referenced one of the daily quotes from a Brother at the Society of St. John the Evangelist, but it has probably been frequently. And I always tell myself I will not use one of the quotes for a while, but then one comes across email and I am taken by how it makes me think and want to share. And I think it's probably OK with them because we're supposed to be sharing the word of God.

Brother Geoffrey Tristram's post from last week provided food for thought and a springboard for even further thought — dessert, if you will. He said, "How can we keep the glorious, life-giving reality that life is a gift in our hearts and minds, when we have to live and perform in a society which tells us that everything has to be earned?" He has a good point. I translate his use of the word "life" into love, because love is the living out of life.

When we are young, if we are fortunate, we may instinctively know love is unconditional, that we are loved. But nonetheless, we learn that if we eat our food, we get a smile; as we become potty trained, we may receive a reward or told how good we are; if we earn good grades, we may be looked upon favorably; if we compete well, we may earn medals or prizes; if we work hard, we may earn approval or compensation. With all this young striving to "earn," as we grow older, do we still remember that love is unconditional and cannot be earned? At least when it comes to God?

Sometimes not so. Have you ever bargained with God? Felt that you were not worthy? Wished you were "better" or more faithful or more deserving of His love? These are all signs that some part of us thinks his love needs to be earned, and nothing could be further from the truth. When Jesus died for our sins, hanging up high and casting his shadow over the very people he died for — many of whom had helped put him to death or watched passively — it was a sure sign that his love is unconditional. We didn't deserve it then, and we never will. And we don't have to.

The further food for thought I mentioned, the "dessert" so to speak is this: While many of us have grown up "earning" things, there seems to be, nonetheless, a growing sense of privilege among many. It is not just a mentality of not needing to earn things; it's an "I deserve this" mentality. An "I don't have to follow the rules" perspective. A sense that "I can do what I want because I want to."

We've all exercised a sense of privilege in some way or another. You've likely exceeded the speed limit, cut in line or checked out with 17 items in the 15-item aisle once or twice, haven't you? But I think it is becoming a life style for many.

For the most part, a strong sense of privilege does not work in society because it means I take and do what I want and to heck with you. But, a burdensome sense of having to earn everything leads to disappointment or causes us to focus on the next "goal."

So what I'm getting at is that there is a beautiful wide river that flows between "earning" and "privilege," and it is the river of love God pours out before us ... teeming with life, at times overflowing its banks and always new and refreshing. It follows us and flows into us. And, if we can live between the opposing banks of needing to earn everything and the desire to flaunt privilege, then we can simply accept the gift of being loved and invite that living water to flow through us and into someone waiting on one bank or the other at the water's edge.