

Fourth Sunday in Lent; March 10, 2024

+ John 3:14-21 +

“God Loved the World Like This”

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned, but the one who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. This is the basis for judgment: The light has come into the world, yet people loved darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. In fact, everyone who practices wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, or else his deeds would be exposed. But the one who does what is true comes toward the light, in order that his deeds may be seen as having been done in connection with God.”

It is the passage most memorized, stuck on bumpers and stenciled on signs behind football uprights: John 3:16, which begins: **For God so loved the world.** “So loved” might make you think Jesus is speaking about big love. But he’s not, really. Of course, God’s love for the world was big when he gave his only-begotten Son. There are many Bible passages that teach the height and depth, the startling size of God’s love for the world. It’s just that this isn’t one of them.

The word “so” is the translation of a word that means “in this way.” John 3:16 tells us not that God’s love is big – it is! – but what it looks like, how it expresses itself. God loved the world like this: **he gave.** He loves by giving – donating, to be exact. It is giving that demands nothing at all in exchange for the gift. This is so strange to our minds. Every gift we give expects a return – some sort of windfall to even the score, a pat on the back from the conscience, a good feeling at least. God is pure donor.

And he had to be. Because who was he giving to? A world of sinners that he calls, in his own words, dead, slaves, enemies, rebels, sinners, blind, objects of wrath. He gave to his fallen creation that had given him nothing but disobedience that plunged them and his whole creation into destruction. God loved the world like this: he gave purely to those who had nothing to give in return. This is grace: divine, undeserved love.

But God also loves the world by giving the right gift – the one gift – it needed to be saved from its sin. Have you ever opened a gift and thought, “Well, that’s nice. But it’s not what I need.” It’s rude. Hopefully you wouldn’t say it out loud, especially not in front of the giver. But what I mean is, if you’re a broke college kid and your aunt sends you yet another sweater, you can’t help but think, “I needed fifty dollars, not a Santa sweater.” If your wedding registry was ignored and you open your fourth toaster, you have to think, “Well, that’s swell.” All gifts are good, but the best are the right gifts. God gave just the right gift to the world of lost sinners. This is how God loved the world: **he gave his only-begotten Son.** This is the perfect gift because it was given for a purpose: **to save the world through him.**

God loved the world like this: he gave to save, and so he gave the one gift that saves the world: his own Son, the sinner’s righteousness, the reconciler of rebels and enemies, the life of the spiritually dead, the liberator of slaves, the sight of the spiritually blind, the salvation of the lost. God gives all this to us in his Son: righteousness, reconciliation, life, freedom. **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so**

the Son of Man must be lifted up..." The Son of God, God's gift to the world, was raised up on the cross to give eternal life. God loved the world like this: He gave his Son to be our righteousness, and to be lifted up and sacrificed to save us from our sin.

And yet, through all this beauty about God's love for the world, how he expresses that love for the world and leaves no one out, Jesus also makes it clear that not all the world loves God. Many prefer the darkness of unbelief and remain under the curse of their sin. This is not what God wants: **"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."** God does not desire anyone to turn away from his perfect gift and perish, but the love of darkness – unbelief and sin – persists.

To us who believe God has given faith. As the Israelites who looked at the snake in faith were healed, we who look to God's Son, his holy life, his death when he was lifted up on the cross, are healed. The gift God gave – the only one that saves – is yours and mine through God's work of faith. But we who believe must hear this in our Savior's words: God wants all to believe and be saved. We now speak for Jesus, and take his words to the world: there is a God who loves you, and shows it like this: he gave, freely and completely, the one perfect gift, to be holy for us and to be lifted up for us, because he wants us all to be saved for eternity. Who do you know who needs to hear that message? Maybe you think: She already knows. We brought her to church when she was a kid. Or maybe you think: That guy would laugh in my face. Or maybe you think: That's what missionaries are for.

But Jesus spoke these words to a man who, by logical evaluation, should never have believed them. He spoke them to a man who belonged to the Pharisees, who had already heard Jesus before without believing. And he became a man who confessed his saving faith on Good Friday, boldly and openly honoring Jesus by laying him in a tomb. The message of how God loved the world, the gift he gave, why he gave it, breaks the darkness of unbelief. Think of someone who needs to hear it – and don't assume it won't work. It worked faith in the heart of Nicodemus. It can work on anyone. When, where, and on whom is the Holy Spirit's business. Ours is to echo faithfully Jesus' message of how God showed his love for the world.

And this is also our work: **"But the one who does what is true comes toward the light, in order that his deeds may be seen as having been done in connection with God."** Jesus tells us to show with our deeds that we are connected to God's deeds. What is God's deed here? To give to wretches. To give totally freely, demanding nothing in return. To give the best gift, the only gift, to bless them with eternal life. Who deserves nothing from you? Who has made themselves your enemy? Let your deeds show your connection to God by loving that person. How can you love your enemy, someone who deserves nothing from you? Watch God. His love expresses itself with action. You will likely never feel warm feelings toward that person, but you can act for their good. You can give them something good – not perfect like God, but good – demanding no return.

Then you are loving like God, who gave you – his enemy – the perfect gift, the one and only gift that saves you, and the faith to believe it. Amen.