

Lent 2A17, March 12, 2017, John 3:1-17, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

“This is one of the best and most glorious Gospel lessons, such as John particularly wrote. It is worthy to be written in golden letters, not upon paper, but if possible upon the heart; it ought to be made the daily lesson and meditation of Christians, who should repeat it to strengthen their faith and awaken their hearts to prayer. The words make the sad joyful and the dead alive, if the heart only firmly believes them.”

So wrote Martin Luther in his sermon on the gospel text we just heard this morning. Luther called this passage “The gospel in miniature,” for it captures in a few short words the very essence of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is pure grace, Luther says, for it shows the love and gift of God for the sake of the whole world. God desires all people to enjoy the gift of eternal life. No one is to be left out, for it’s all by the grace and love of God we are brought into the light of salvation.

Standing at the center of this gospel is probably the most famous verse in the whole Bible. It’s the one verse most Christians can recite by heart, John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” We are led to the very heart of God whose depth of love for his creation is revealed in the sending of his Son. No matter how far off the track his creation may wander, God loves us. No matter how rebellious, God’s love reaches deep into our world. God does not reject us, though we might reject him. God is always there, wanting us to look upon him, fix our eyes upon his salvation, and believe with all our hearts.

Yet what is it that we are asked to look at? What does God want for us to believe with all our hearts? What does this mean that God so loves the world?

Now we’re talking about love. True love, authentic love, always brings together word and action. It doesn’t much matter if I say to my child, or my spouse or my parent, “I love you,” only to turn around and behave indifferently, abusively or neglectful. Love is false and empty if we say we love the poor but then don’t do what we can to feed them or clothe them or lift them out of their poverty. A child may profess their love for a pet such as their dog or cat or hamster, but they need to learn that love also includes feeding them, grooming them, taking them for a walk even in the rain, cleaning their pen. An authentic love joins together words and actions.

Jesus speaks of the actions which accompany God’s declaration of love for the whole world. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” God’s act of love entails the Son of Man being lifted up. This is John’s way of speaking about Jesus’ death on the cross. When Jesus is crucified he will be lifted up above the earth. John isn’t speaking of his ascension into heaven. He is literally speaking of Jesus hanging on a cross stuck into the ground with people standing by and looking up at him. And at the foot of the cross there are two types of people. Some will look upon him and see the depths of God’s love for the whole world. They see through the eyes of faith. Others will look upon him and see nothing, and so will continue to live in darkness.

I don’t know about you, but I’m not really an “either-or” type of person. I see both of these qualities in myself, and maybe you do too. We look to Jesus with faith, but our faith is imperfect. We see the God’s love for the whole world, pouring himself out in a self-giving love which does not count the cost. But we ourselves continue to hold back something of ourselves. We too love the world, sometimes too much, and so we cling to the old ways of sinful, selfish, cautious reserve. We make choices that benefit ourselves first. And, if enough is left over, then

we might give to our neighbor. We are skillful at counting the cost, and if the cost is too high, we aren't willing to pay.

This is the world in which we live. It is the world John the gospel writer declares is full of darkness, not really knowing God, indeed even rejecting the one God sends into the world. John simply uses these images of light and dark, accepting and rejecting, as shorthand ways to describe a reality we all know too well.

The truth of the matter is we don't embrace with our whole hearts the life God wants for us. We don't take God at his word that life does not consist of how much we own, or the security of our investments, or the status of our health or the quality of our entertainment. We don't always see our neighbor as one who is worthy of the same kind of love we bear for our selves. And by "neighbor" I mean the word as the bible uses it. Your neighbor is necessarily the person who lives next door to you, the one you might be likely to help in time of need. But the real neighbor is precisely the one different than you. The one whose politics you disagree with, the one who has made bad choices in life, the person against whom you might lock your doors or cross to the other side of the street. We don't trust God at his word when he says, "love your neighbor as yourself," when the neighbor is seen as a threat. This is the real meaning behind those words we confess each week. "We have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves."

"For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son." In spite of our inability to love God and love our neighbor, God continues to love us and the whole world he has made. This is the very heart of grace, to love and continue to love even when the object of your love doesn't return it fully or completely. And so, in a final and complete act of love, God took on all the hatred, all the violence, all the evil this world has to offer and took it upon himself. The full force of the world's evil comes to bear on Jesus on the cross. When we look upon the cross that's what we are seeing. We are seeing what God has done about the evil in which we so easily find ourselves stuck. We see the weight of all this hatred and violence come to rest on the cross.

This is what God's love looks like. This is where the cycle of violence and hatred comes to an end. This is the beginning of the healing of the world and every human heart. God bids us to look upon Jesus with eyes of faith lifted up on the cross and find life. We find life because in the cross all the death-inducing violence of the world which infects every human heart is defeated. The seemingly endless cycles of evil are broken. God declares, this is not how it will be in my world. The world God created was created by love and for love.

You are now the children of God called to live by love, because you are those God loves. You are in and among the world God so loves that he gives his only Son. Through the waters of baptism the Holy Spirit you are born anew for a life of love. Love for God, and love for your neighbor. In words of faith and acts of service.

For God so loves the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Luther was right to call this one small verse the Gospel in miniature. For here is contained the healing of the nations, the healing of every human heart. It is the very grace of God, sheer gift, infinite love. Amen.