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Lent 2
20 March 2011
Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita
John 3:1-17

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

God the Father in Heaven loves *you*.

But He doesn't simply love you the way family will say, "Love ya" to each other.
And He doesn't simply love you in the way lovers do.

His love is unique.

Yes, it includes the love shared between brothers and friends.

Yes it includes the same passion and intimacy of love as husbands and wives share.

But these two types of love pale in comparison to the Father's love for you.

But why?

Why does He love you?

There's not much worth loving, to be quite honest.

There's all sorts of anger and hatred,

jealousy and gossip,

pride and arrogance,

and adultery to no end!

There's little repentance and no lack of guilt

and the pews are hardly filled.

So why does the Father love us?

Well, the answer to that isn't found in us.

He doesn't love us because of anything we do or say or how we live.

He doesn't love us because of any good deeds, or because of decisions we've made.

His love is simply unexplainable.

He has no reason to love us,

at least, not on account of us.

And yet your favorite Bible verse says,

"For God loved the world in this way,

that He gave His only-begotten Son [into death],

in order that everyone believing in Him would not be lost,

but have life everlasting." (Jn 3:16)

Have you ever thought about that verse and what it says of the Father's love for you?

John 3:16 doesn't primarily intend to talk about "How much" God loves us,

but in what *way* God loves us.

It's not that He just loves you so much He wants to give you a big hug—.

It's that He loved you in such a way that He did whatever it took to bring you back from the dead.

He gave His Son, *into death, for you.*

Our Gospel asks us to consider John 3:16 not in the context of football games, or billboards, or any sort of marketing evangelism—.

St. John says, “remember Moses and the wilderness bunch.”

Remember the rebellion of the people against God and against Moses,

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there is no food and no water,

and we loathe this worthless food” (Num 21:5).

How did the Lord Yahweh respond?

“Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (Num 21:6).

When the people finally cried out in repentance and for their lives,

“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you, Moses.

Pray to the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us” (Num 21:7).

So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to him,

“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole,

and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (Num 21:8).

And so it was, everyone that believed this promise—

who looked upon the serpent lifted up on the pole—

was healed. They lived. Their curse was taken away.

This is the context in which John 3:16 best fits:

God loved the world *in this way*,

that He gave His only begotten Son to be lifted up on the pole of the cross—

to be the cure and remedy for our plague, our curse, our sin.

Anyone that believes this promise—

who looks to this crucified, bloody, and broken Jesus—

will be healed, will be saved, will live and see and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

That bronze serpent that Moses lifted up on a pole for the people of Israel,

was a picture, a type, an icon of what Christ did on the cross *for you.*

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so also it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up” (Jn 3:14).

That is how God loves you.

He loves you in such a way that He gave His only son into death *for you.*

And if He hadn't,
 your lust, pride, anger, jealousy, gossip, slander, and laziness,
 would've been the death of you.

But His love doesn't end there—
 it doesn't cease on the cross.

Indeed, that's where it *begins!*
 The crucified and risen Jesus defeated death forever.
 He took the sting of death away.
 He won the victory forever.

But you weren't there, were you?
 What good is the cross and the empty tomb, if you weren't there?
 How does His blood get on you?
 How does His forgiveness apply *to you*?

Well, that's precisely what Jesus tries to get through to Nicodemus at the start of this Gospel.
 (If you've been paying attention, we're working our way backwards through the Gospel.)

Nicodemus wants to enter the Kingdom, to see it, to taste it, to touch it!
 He's not coming to trap Jesus like most Pharisees.
 He comes at night because he's ashamed to ask Jesus publicly.
 Nicodemus is a *teacher* of the Pharisees—he ought to know well enough.

But Nicodemus wants to see and enter the Kingdom on his own,
 by his own learning and piety and good living.
 He comes to the Rabbi to see what he's missed and how he can fix it.

Jesus will have none of this—
 it goes against everything the cross stands for.
 Just as the people of Israel couldn't cure themselves from their poisonous
 snakebites—
 neither can you cure yourself of your sin,
 from your wanting to be God.

The cross of Christ is the only way.
 And it's *Christ's* journey to the cross that wins the victory and opens the Kingdom of
 heaven to all believers.

And since it's never us going to Him that counts,
 but Him coming to us—
 Jesus starts with Baptism.

**“Truly truly I say to you, unless one is born again (or from above),
he cannot see the kingdom of God;
unless one is born of water and Spirit,
he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (3:3,5).**

To be born again or born from above is to be baptized—
that’s where Water and Spirit come together and give you new life.

And don’t be mistaken,
Baptism isn’t *your* work or *your* decision or *your* doing in the least.
It’s God’s.
He baptizes,
He forgives,
He applies the victory of His cross to you.

And that’s precisely how His love comes to you.

Our Lord takes what happened on the cross,
that crucified Lord with His dead body and shed blood,
and He gives it all to you—
first in the waters of Holy Baptism,
then through the Word of sins forgiven, the Gospel,
then again and again and again in His body and blood with bread and wine.

So when you doubt His love for you,
when this world seems too broken for God to love you,
when you struggle, fall, question, doubt, or fall back into your sin—
come running to the place He’s promised to be *for you*.

Return to your baptism by hearing the Lord’s word, “I forgive you.”
Gather around the preaching of your sins forgiven for Christ’s sake alone.
And do gather at this altar, where He gives out the very body and blood that was
nailed to the cross *for you*.

Your sins are forgiven;
your plague is ended;
your curse is removed.
The cross has come to you, been applied to you, been put upon you.

Go in peace.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit