

March 14, 2021
4th Sunday in Lent

What Wondrous Love

Text: John 3:16-21

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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Sermon:

It was a simple question. It was a throwaway question that simply caught us off guard, and yet, one thing I have learned is that such questions are rarely what they seem. Sometimes the simplest questions have the unique ability to stick around—to linger—to bounce around in our heads and to invite us to go deeper. After all, Jesus—the one that we follow in Lent—was an absolute master of asking those simple, even one line questions that prompted radical transformation, not just in the moment of that initial aha, but in all the days to follow. “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. And that’s a question that should take us all of our lives to answer.

The question that I’m referring to came from Greta. She was a seemingly simple and straightforward person. After a mere second of getting to know her, you knew that her mind, her faith, and her abilities and her instruction were anything but simple or straightforward. They were nothing short of amazing. She was in pursuit of her Ph.D. in theology, and so part of the way that she made that work was to serve as a teaching assistant for us budding pastors in our required systematic theology course. At the beginning of one of our sessions, her seemingly innocent question was this: “When you think about God—when you start a prayer, or when you talk about God, what are the descriptive words that you use most often?”

Before I tell you mine, I want you to think for a moment: what one or two words do you often turn to when you prayer or talk with or try to describe God? The reason she asked that question is because of the *gravitas* of theology itself. Theology literally means, “talking about God,” and she wanted to impress upon us the idea that when we do, the words that we use matter because they put us on a path; they give us direction; they help us and others understand the fundamental and foundational ways that we understand who God is, how God acts and how all of that has relevance for how we live.

For me, the two words I use have been familiar for a long time. If you’ve been coming to this church for a long time, you’ll know what they are because they are my default words. I’ve tried to be creative, but they are just the two words that I go back to over and over again--“Holy and

Loving God.” Holy—reaching out and beyond—“Holy”—worthy of following and amazing. And “Loving”—that one’s easier, like Meister Eckhart—I can’t picture God without the concept of love. Both of those qualities are on full display this morning in our reading from John.

Susan read for you this morning some of the most familiar words in the entire Bible and some of the most important: “For God so loved the world...” Now you know what I would make you do if you were in this room, don’t you? I would start that phrase and I bet you can finish it, and I want you to say it out loud. “For God so loved the world...” Thank God for Jack Brown in the room (who took me up on it and finished the phrase...) The amazing thing is to hear these words imprinted on our hearts and then to see different faces, such as Anne McKinstry with her arms spread wide, or the tears rolling down other people’s faces at the truth of the fact that God came to save us all. This is what we mean with covenants written on our hearts. The only problem with those words in John 3:16 is that it makes it hard for us to focus on the words in 3:17—and certainly hard for us to remember the words from 3:18 to 3:21, because quite frankly we get stuck in that beautiful reality and who can blame us?

“For God so loved the world” is a statement of decisive action and decision-making on God’s part. God loved and so God saved. God loved the whole world and so God saved the whole world. Because God is the eternal One—the still speaking One we know that God didn’t just save the world; God is still saving the world and everyone in it with each and every breath. But in the following verses—those verses that we don’t always pay attention to are two things that fundamentally matter—things that are integral to this decisive action—things that invite, if not *demand* action on our part.

Those two things are belief and judgment. Believe in Jesus! The judgment is this; John says this—both of them locked in an embrace—a dance in the salvation that God offers, and neither of them is as simple as we have tried to make them. John says that all who believe in Jesus are not condemned but those who don’t are already condemned. Maybe it would be easier just to go back to that loving part. But this is part and parcel of that loving part, for remember when we talk about belief in the Bible, it is never merely a mental construct or a thing we proclaim just with our lips, or any creed or statement of faith. Instead belief is that thing—that truth; it is whatever we give our life force to with our voice and our action—with our statements and the ways we live our lives. Belief is a giving to—a following.

While we’ve spent most of our weeks in Lent following Mark’s Gospel, know that Mark keeps his statements wide open so that we might enter into them; he keeps them broad that they might apply. Instead John often dives right in with specificity and clarity. Having just described the decisive loving act of God, John lays out the decision that is before each of us this morning, and he does it in unambiguous, unavoidable clarity. That decision affects the judgment. Notice that in this passage that the judgment is all about the light—what we do with it, what we bring to it, how we live with it and how through it, we reflect that Holy God sent light into the world through that light. Jesus has shown us the fullness of life and a vision of the world that is possible through his way.

John’s judgment here reminds me so much of that famous Robert Frost poem. Here is the truth that two paths diverge in the woods of our living, and in that poem of Frost, he laments in the

first stanza that you cannot choose both. You must make a choice for one or the other, so which one are you going to pick—the light or the shadow? Will you bring everything to the light, rather than lingering in the dark, but known and quite comfortable corners of our faith? It is the less traveled path; it is the harder path, but it is the path that makes all the difference.

It means bringing into the light of Christ and letting go of the grudges that we carry or the wounds that have been inflicted upon us, rather than feeding them in our own need to be right. Coming into the light is acknowledging our weaknesses, our addictions or our needs, rather than hiding them from our loved ones, from our neighbors or from ourselves. It is to embrace our connections, rather than clinging to those false freedoms of independence. And the question John wants to know this morning is which one will we pick?

What I love about this passage is if you look at it closely, you will notice that nowhere here does it label anyone intrinsically good or forever evil. Instead, it lays out the truth that each of us with each breath is capable of making decisions that quite frankly take us in that moment in one of those two directions. It's the truth that within the *woods* of our lives, it is not about making a singular choice on a singular branch of a path but rather in the midst of those woods, the path will branch out endlessly. All of those choices may be leading to a singular affirmation.

The truth is that we are faced with choices over and over again to go into that light, or because we are ashamed of what we do—instead hide in the darkness. Both for our benefit, and by the way John maintains for others too so that others can see this light—that's another sermon for another day.

This morning I want to remind you of something that will hopefully make choosing that path to stand in the light easier. It's in the first lines of this passage—the one we love so much. Remember those ones so bright and beautiful, so bright and evocative—ones that we can easily forget when that word *judgment* comes up. Remember, friends that God has already acted decisively and in love saved the whole world—including you. So friends, there is nothing to hide. John O'Donohue reminds us of that in this beautiful statement: he calls it the “subversive consolation of God.” He says that, “It is sweet mercy that sees beyond our blunders and falsities.” When we come in that light, John O'Donohue says, “We need feel no shame, no guilt, no anxiousness, no storm can touch us there in the presence of the God of Beauty, our own beauty shines out. God is the atmosphere where our essence clarifies, and there is no need for any falsity or pretension anymore. Here, we are utterly enfolded; no words are needed; no action is required, for everything we need is here.” That is what happens when we choose that path of standing in the light just as we are.

So how do you do it? Remember from a previous message in Lent; start from where you are. As Desmond Tutu says, “Start small.” Forgive a hurt or let go of a grudge that you know no longer serves any purpose to hold onto anymore. If you can't tell anyone else about a problem you have, share it with that Holy and Loving God or whisper it to your own heart. Find a place to connect or serve, even if there still are bigger relationships that need your help. Because here's the thing—that light grows. Finding small graces, like Frost illuminated, helps us to change everything—and the next time to take bigger and bolder steps each time a choice comes. It is more natural and easy then to choose light.

John's Gospel is chock full of characters who change and grow. There's Nicodemus who sneaks around in the dark to find Jesus the first time and who throughout the Gospel makes gradual progress until there on the day of crucifixion, he is there in broad daylight taking Jesus down from the cross for all to see. And if you can't relate to Nicodemus, then maybe you can relate to someone who's more front and center in the Gospels, and that is Peter.

We are approaching Palm Sunday and Holy Week and all the characters—the women, the disciples become our surrogates, so don't forget Peter, and not because he always gets it right because he doesn't. Even now, he chooses wrong paths. It would be Peter, though, who was bold enough to follow those soldiers who have taken Jesus; he followed them all the way to the courtyard of their very barracks. He was bold enough to draw close enough to the fire pits there to bathe in the light and warmth, and then a moment later, it would be Peter who would retreat into the darkness three times when asked if he followed Jesus, if he believed. It would be Peter who wouldn't go to the tomb, perhaps out of grief, until the faithful women gave him hope, and then the Gospel tells us that he ran. And it will be Peter in John's Gospel who ends the whole story. It is Jesus asking Peter three times if he loves him. And this time Peter is not denying anything but answering that he does, so Jesus says, "Pick the path. Feed my sheep."

Pick the path. And we know he does. Because in the Book of Acts, every time Peter gets more bold and decisive; every time he sees the choice to take the light, he takes it. Peter heals the lame. Peter welcomes the outsider; Peter even bestows the Holy Spirit and is a conduit of that Spirit to others. Friends, God chose once and for all and now God asks us to choose. Choose again and again until the choice becomes as natural as our next breath—until we become that very love that God sent. Where does all of that take us?

Well, my current faith reading is Meister Eckhart, who, not unlike Greta, always expresses himself in pithy simplicity that sticks with us and invites us to go deeper. He writes this, "A wise teacher once said that what we love we become in love." So when we love God, does that mean we become God? And while at first blush, it sounds outrageous, and it is—but it is no less true for all that. "For the love we give to God or others, there are not two but one, and in love you are more God than you are yourself. For what you love, you become in love." So Eckhart says, "Love and let the rest be." With that beauty, friends, will you pray with me:

*Holy and Loving God—
May your Love become our Love
May our Love become your Light
May we be bound up in you and in neighbor
Until there no longer is shadow—
Until you fill us, complete us and empower us
In your wondrous Love.*

Amen

Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor