

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Lent 2
March 5, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, our gospel reading from John's Gospel contains that all too familiar verse, John 3:16.

Yes, of all the verses in the Bible, no doubt the most well-known is 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.

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.

Yes, this is arguably THE single most recognizable verse in the whole of Scripture.

In fact, every once in a while, you will see on television someone at some sporting event, or some other kind of event, holding up a sign that says "John 3:16."

Yes, to be sure, individuals, die hard Christian believers, who want to proclaim the message of Christianity, will fashion a sign with "John 3:16" written on it, and hold it up at some televised event with the hope that the TV camera will catch them, and broadcast their sign out to the television audience.

Or, we have no doubt seen individuals who wear clothing articles, shirts or hats and the like, with "John 3:16" emblazoned across the front.

So, yes, John 3:16 is quite familiar to us.

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.

But, of all the verses in the Bible, why this verse?

What is so special about this verse?

Well, it should be obvious that John 3:16 sums up the message of Christianity.

In fact, good old Martin Luther said, “John 3:16 is the gospel-in-miniature.”

The Good News of God is encapsulated in this one verse.

God loves the world and God promises new life through faith in his Son Jesus Christ, whom God gave to us as a gift.

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.

PAUSE

But, I had a professor at seminary who said, that he preferred the next verse, John 3:17.

This seminary professor said that John 3:17 was actually as significant if not more significant than John 3:16.

John 3:17 says, “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.”

Now why did this seminary professor emphasize the importance of John 3:17?

Why? Because John 3:17 emphasizes that God’s Son Jesus Christ is not about judging the world.

Jesus is not about bringing wrath upon the world.

Jesus does not condemn the world.

No, God sent his Son so that the world might be saved through him.

And I think this is profoundly important.

You see, John 3:17 makes it clear that salvation is not about the Law.

It is about grace. Salvation is a gift. God gave us the gift of his Son that we might have eternal life.

Judgment, wrath, and condemnation—these are the things inherent in the Law.

We are not saved by the Law. The Law can only reveal our sin, and as such the Law will only lead to despair.

Which I have noted to us many times before from the pulpit and in other contexts, but it is worth repeating.

The Law can only reveal our sin, and lead to despair.

We say to a child, “Don’t eat the cookies in the cookie jar,” and that is all a child wants to do.

The commandments tell us, “Don’t steal. Don’t kill. Don’t lie.”

And those are the very things we want to do.

The Law reveals our sin and leads us to despair.

PAUSE

I am reminded of that famous movie *Forrest Gump*, and in particular, of that scene which subtly conveys this very message.

It is a scene at the very end of the movie, where Big Forrest is sending his son Little Forrest off to school on his first day.

The school bus pulls up, and Little Forrest is just about to step onto the bus, when Big Forrest says, “Forrest, don’t...”

And Little Forrest stops and turns to look at his dad.

And then Big Forrest catches himself, and he says to Little Forrest, “I just wanted to tell you, ‘I love you.’”

And Little Forrest responds, “I love you, too, Daddy.”

Do we remember this scene?

Big Forrest begins to say, “Don’t...” and then catches himself, and reconsiders his words, and so then says, “I just wanted to tell you, ‘I love you.’”

And Little Forrest responds, “I love you, too, Daddy.”

And, we might wonder why this exchange of words is even in the movie?

We might wonder, “What is the significance of this brief dialogue at the end of the movie?”

And it is so subtle in the movie that it is easy to miss it.

But, what is going on here is this idea no doubt that to begin saying to a person, even a child, “Don’t...Don’t do this, don’t do that. Don’t say this, don’t say that.”

To begin saying to a person, “Don’t...” is to start from the place of the Law. It is to start from a place of judgment and condemnation.

So, Big Forrest catches himself, and he reconsiders his words, and he begins again from a place of grace, “I just wanted to tell you, ‘I love you.’”

And if we remember that movie in its entirety, Forrest Gump as a character is all about grace in every relationship he has in that film.

And there is a powerful moment in the movie where Forrest at one point says, “I may not be a smart man, but I know what love is.”

And it is true. He does. Love and salvation starts from a place of grace, not from the Law.

PAUSE

So, consider then the person in our gospel reading named Nicodemus.

Notice that Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee, and he is described as a leader of the Jews.

Nicodemus is a bit of a puzzling character in John’s gospel, for he first comes to Jesus at night.

And he will appear elsewhere in John’s gospel, and he is depicted as one who is seeking to understand who Jesus is, but at the same time, he doesn’t necessarily want people to know.

And we wonder if he ever does come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

The gospel of John never says so definitively.

But, again, notice that he is described as a Pharisee.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is one who would have known the Law forwards and backwards, up and down, left and right.

And this detail then is significant because Nicodemus represents the focus of the Jewish nation.

Salvation in ancient Judaism was achieved by following the Law.

The Law was the means of obtaining life with God.

And it is noteworthy that Jesus refers here in this text to Moses, who is the great lawgiver.

Jesus says that just as Moses (the great lawgiver) is lifted, so must the Son of Man (Jesus himself) be lifted up...

But here is the kicker.

The Son of Man must be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

What? Wait. What did you say?

Whoever believes in the Son of Man, whoever believes in Jesus may have eternal life.

What about the Law as the means to life with God?

What about the Law as the way of salvation?

Nope, faith in Jesus Christ is now what is necessary.

PAUSE

And I can only imagine how this news rocked Nicodemus to the core.

Here is a man who had devoted his entire life to learning, and studying, and following the Law.

And now, he is told that faith in Jesus is the way of salvation and life.

PAUSE

Again, Nicodemus is a seeker.

And we never know for sure if Nicodemus comes to believe in Jesus.

The last we hear of Nicodemus is at the burial of Jesus.

Strangely enough, we are told that he brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, a hundred pounds worth, so as to wrap Jesus' body with these spices in linen cloths.

But a hundred pounds of spices was much, much more than necessary.

And so is this a sign of great faith in Jesus, such that he is honoring Jesus with an abundance of spices?

Or is this meant to be sign of inadequate faith, such that Nicodemus does not believe in Jesus' resurrection, that the abundance of spices tells us that Nicodemus believes Jesus to be dead, never to rise again?

So, we never do know for sure if Nicodemus comes to believe.

PAUSE

But, for us, our passage from John, chapter 3, verses 16 and 17—these verses say it all.

God is about grace. The Law does not save.

This is not to say that the Law is obsolete.

No, the Law, as I said, reveals our sin, and the Law alone would then leave us in despair, for the Law does not save us.

But in our despair, says Luther, the Law then drives us toward Jesus, who alone can contend with sin, by taking our sin upon himself on the cross.

But we need to recognize our sin and our need for Jesus.

And the point then is that the gift of God in Jesus Christ does not exacerbate the human condition.

God does not send his Son into the world to condemn the world.

Like Big Forrester who addresses his son as he is getting on that school bus...God is not saying "Don't...Don't do this, don't do that. Don't say this, don't say that."

No, God is not condemning us, not bringing judgment upon us, not bringing wrath down upon us, by sending us his Son.

No, God so loved the world, and by an abundance of love, God is moved to save us by even giving us his Son, as an act of his grace.

God so loves the world that God gave us his own Son, so that we may not perish, but have eternal life.

Jesus does not condemn us, but it is the power of sin which has already condemned us.

And the Law is powerless in the face of sin. The Law only reveals to us our sin.

Trying to do all that the Law requires of us...trying to fulfill the Law is not going to save us.

We need to turn to Jesus.

PAUSE

And it seems but a simple thing to have faith in Jesus.

It even seems impractical that faith, belief in a person who walked this earth 2000 years ago is what brings us to eternal life.

But, to that argument, we should respond that it is not just faith in a person, but it is more about faith in an ideal.

It is faith in the image of love embodied in Jesus Christ.

Again, the words of Forrest Gump echo loudly for us.

We may not be smart people, but we know what love is.

Love is grace. Love is not a whole litany of "thou shalt not's."

Love is not saying, "Don't, don't, don't."

No, love is a gift, love is the gift of one's self for the other person, whether that person is our family member, our friend, our neighbor, or the stranger we have not met.

Love is the gift of one's self freely given, as God has freely given himself for us in his Son Jesus Christ.

That is faith, it is not simply believing in the person Jesus Christ, it is believing in the image of love embodied in the person Jesus, and embodying that image then to everyone around us.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but 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.

To which we respond in joy, thanks be to God. AMEN.