

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 10, 2024
10am

Text: John 3:14-21

Theme: The Shadow of Authority

[prayer]

I only watched a portion of the Super Bowl last month, but I am willing to bet that at some point during the broadcast a camera caught a person holding a sign with John 3:16 printed on it. Decades ago, a man named Rollen Stewart began positioning himself in sports arenas with that sign. He wanted to spread the Gospel. I don't know if anyone has ever been converted by one of those signs, but the practice has been taken up by hundreds of people since, not to mention by billboards and bumper stickers and almost every kind of marketing gimmick you can think of.

Why John 3:16? There are 31,102 verses in the Bible, so why this particular verse? Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the gospel in miniature" because this verse and the surrounding passage distills the relationship between God's love and God's justice. And that relationship is what the Good News is all about. If we distort this verse, distort this relationship, then we turn the Gospel into an anti-Gospel – a Gospel of condemnation rather than grace.

Just prior to our Gospel lesson, Jesus is visited by a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Jewish religious leader. He is not convinced that Jesus has come from God, but he is beginning to wonder. He comes to Jesus at night, in the shadows, so that his curiosity can remain hidden from the world. He wants to understand where Jesus' authority comes from.

Nicodemus and Jesus spend some time conversing about what it means to be "born again" or "born from above" (the Greek word, *anōthen*, can mean either). Jesus then launches into today's Gospel reading – a discourse on his identity and

mission as God's Son. He begins by alluding to an ancient story from Israel's wilderness past (Numbers 21:4-9).

There are a dozen stories in Exodus and Numbers about the people rebelling and complaining against God; this story is the last of them. Impatient for the Promised Land, the people "spoke against God and Moses: 'Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water? And we detest this miserable bread!'" (21:5 CEB). (They said this despite the manna that God was feeding them daily!) God responded to their ingratitude by sending a poisonous swarm of snakes. Many Israelites died. The people went to Moses and confessed their sin in the hope that Moses would intercede on their behalf. God showed the people mercy by directing Moses to fashion a bronze serpent on a pole so that whoever was bitten could "look upon it and live" (21:9).

This is a story about God's judgment tempered by God's mercy. Nicodemus would have been familiar with its meaning: God is a god who saves His people even in the face of open rebellion. The Israelites self-destructively turned against the God who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and still God chose to save them. And how did God do this? By ironically ordering them to look upon a bronze serpent. The serpent was a reminder of the deadly consequences of their sin. But it also demonstrated that God could redeem those consequences for their healing and deliverance.

Jesus then says to Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One [Son of Man] be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). Jesus is making a pun on the word "lifted up" by alluding to his crucifixion. The Greek phrase for "lifted up" also means exalted, so Jesus is also alluding to his resurrection and ascension. And what he means by these allusions is this: At the heart of the Gospel is a Great Reversal – the humiliation of the cross becomes Jesus' exaltation; death becomes a means to life. Like the bronze serpent, God will take the cross – a symbol of humanity's violence and betrayal – and turn it into a symbol of forgiveness and deliverance for all humankind. God will take a weapon of torture and death and beat it into a ploughshare that He will use to plant the seeds of new life – *eternal* life.

In John's gospel, "eternal life" is not just a future state of being; it is a present-tense reality. We experience eternal life by *knowing* the Father *through* the Son *in* the power of the Holy Spirit. Because God is eternal, we experience eternity every time we experience God's presence. Recall those moments of prayer or worship in your life that were truly transcendent, like you were transported to another plane of existence. Those moments were transcendent because the Spirit of God was present, and God's presence is eternity touching our everyday lives. Eternal life is not merely unending life, but life that is lived in the unending presence of God. This new form of life starts in the present and culminates in the resurrection when we will live permanently in God's presence.

As we grow in our knowledge and love of God, we experience that taste of eternity more consistently. This is because we learn how to view the world from God's perspective instead of our own. In John's gospel, to believe in Jesus is more than mentally agreeing that he is the Son of God who died and then rose from the dead. Belief is an action word that points to a critical moment of decision – a choice. To believe in Jesus is to choose every day to live your life according to God's will rather than your own. To believe in Jesus is to choose to obey the will of God. In the Gospel, the opposite of belief is not unbelief; it is disobedience (3:36).

We receive eternal life when we allow our lives to be shaped by the presence and will of God (3:5-8). This is why Jesus told Nicodemus that he would not see the kingdom of God unless he was "born *anōthen*" (3:3) – born again from above – born from the Spirit. When we obey the will of God, we are indeed "born again" because we begin to understand and imitate the full character of God that has been revealed to us in Jesus. Our relationship with God defines who we are and what we do. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we look upon Jesus and we begin to understand who God is and what God has done for us.

And this is what God has done: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life" (3:16).

In modern English "so" commonly describes the intensity of God's love – God loved us *so* much that He sent His son to die. But the Greek word for "so," *houtos*, means "in this way." John 3:16 is not a statement about the degree of God's love.

It is actually a statement about the *method* of God's love, as in, "For God loved the world *in this way*..."

And the way that God loved the world is by graciously giving us His Son to deliver us from the self-destruction of our sin. This is yet another allusion that Jesus makes to the story of Israel. This time he goes even further back in time to the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, as a test of Abraham's devotion to God. Abraham's devotion was indeed so strong that he was prepared to kill his son...until God stayed his hand. Jesus is signaling that God's devotion to humanity is even more extravagant than Abraham's devotion. For this is the only verse in John's gospel that speaks of God *giving* His Son rather than *sending* His Son. Jesus is God's extravagant gift of love to humankind.

This language of gift is important. The apostle Paul declares, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8). We easily fall into the trap of thinking that it is our *belief* in Jesus – our obedience to the will of God – that saves us. But our deliverance is pure gift. Belief and obedience are not prerequisites for God's grace. They are instead our grateful response to God's extravagant gift of new and eternal life through His Son.

God offers this gift to the whole world. In Scripture, "world" (*kosmos*) is shorthand for sin and estrangement from God – shorthand for those who, like the Israelites in the desert, rebel against God's leadership – those who are hostile to the ways of God. To say that God so loved the world is to say that God so loved the sinners...so loved the lost...so loved the rebels...so loved *His enemies*...that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him...who obeys His will...will have eternal life.

Who will enjoy this extravagant gift? God's enemies will...which is to say, we will. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23 NIV). We will know who God is and dwell in His presence all the days of our lives.

That is grace – receiving what we do not deserve. God loves "in this way": graciously, mercifully, faithfully, devotedly — and universally, for the sake of the world. The God revealed in Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds. He asks

only that we receive the gift he has offered. If we receive the gift, then we receive eternal life, because our life is reshaped and redefined by the love of God in Jesus.

The basic nature of a gift, though, is that it can be rejected. John tells us that “God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; [but] whoever doesn’t believe in him is already judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son” (v. 17-18). God does not condemn us; we condemn ourselves by rejecting the gift of God’s grace. The Israelites’ behavior in Numbers was self-sabotaging, rejecting God’s gift of manna that sustained them in the wilderness. Likewise, those who reject the gift of God’s Son are afflicted by a self-sabotaging desire to remain in the shadows, away from the light of God’s presence. And lest we think that we would never choose darkness over light, we do it all the time. When we choose our will over God’s, our actions bear false witness against Him, and we make ourselves God’s enemy.

And still God offers us the gift of His Son. Though God is rightfully grieved by our sin, this is how God chooses to exercise His authority over us – not through punishment, but through sacrificial love that is lifted up on a cross.

John 3:16 thus becomes the model of Christian love. The cross is our authority, our model as followers of Jesus. We do not use it to condemn those who do not yet believe. Instead, we shape our lives along its lines. Where there is hatred, we practice love. Where there is judgment, we demonstrate mercy. Where there is condemnation, we speak words of forgiveness. We create a community where love, mercy, and grace are abundant, extravagant gifts that we lavish upon each other, and upon our neighbors, and *especially* upon our enemies – the very people who do not deserve these things. We beat our weapons of torture and death into ploughshares, and we plant seeds of new life, *eternal* life. We proclaim again and again the Good News – not with our signs and billboards and bumper stickers, but with lives that have been reshaped and redefined by the love of God.

Our living cruciform witness is the only power, the only authority, we are called to wield.

Amen.