

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of March 22, 2009*

Moved by the Love of God (John 3:14-21)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. John:

“God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ, this morning we will talk about something mysterious, something that is vast and inexhaustible; something so high and deep we cannot fully understand it. This morning we will explore the unfathomably rich and profound love of God. In my attempt to explain such an immense topic as this I came across one simple and precise quote. It is from a woman named Karen Sunde who said, “To love is to receive a glimpse of heaven.”

God's love for us in this world is a glimpse of heaven. We hear about it in the Bible. When we read the Bible, it can seem like a closed book at times; it can seem to be shrouded in mystery. While some portions of the Bible may seem foreign to us we can understand it provided we start with the right foundation. We can understand Scripture when we approach it from the right starting point. There is a misconception out there that the Bible is all about rules, that it is a giant rulebook for good living. If that were the case then the Bible would be nothing more than a cold and impersonal book that would not give us a relationship with our Creator. It would be a book with no heart where God would be distant and far off.

But thanks to God this is not the basis of His Word. God gave us the Bible, His Word so we could know Him. We can understand His Word when we start with the fact that He is a God of love. First John tells us this most clearly. He says, “God is love”. The Bible is all about His plan of salvation. It is the message of His love for His creation. It is a book of His love ultimately.

Now to understand the heart of God we must know what is meant by love in the Bible. Firstly, love, for God is not simply a feeling. In contrast to the world where divorce is rampant and people's love is fickle and fleeting like the wind, God's love is sacrificial. He is 100% committed and devoted to loving His creation. We see this in how He provides everything we need. Our food, our clothes, our homes, our income, our family and friends.

But the clearest expression of God's love we find in the Person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus came to earth it was God Himself who came down and became a man. He came so we might know Him as our Friend and Saviour and Redeemer. We find in the Gospel

reading today perhaps the most famous of Scripture verses in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." This one little verse is the Gospel in a nutshell. Let us all have this etched in our memory. It is the Word of life from Christ.

What makes His love special is that it is completely sacrificial. It is one sided with no thought of reward. In John's first epistle, the third chapter he says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us". When we give with no thought of receiving something in return, this is the essence of love in the Biblical sense. This is agape love in Greek. It is unconditional love even to someone who doesn't deserve it. Jesus gave from His desire to help the poor and to save the lost. He took the expression, "Give 'till it hurts" to the extreme. He gave His entire life to redeem us. He had nothing to gain. He already had all of heaven. He offered Himself to give us life with Him.

His love was not only for nice and lovable people. He gave not only to His friends, but to His enemies too. As it says in Romans 5, "God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us". Friends, it is easy to be kind to people who are kind to us. It is natural to love our friends, to give things to our friends. But how about our enemies? What about someone who insults and hurts us? What if someone stole our car or broke into our home and took our food? It wouldn't be so easy to do something good for that person. It's not easy to pray for those who use us. To respond with love is truly a divine work.

He died for us knowing that we are rebels by nature. Even when we were dead in our sins He opened the way to life by His cross. He saw us in our poor condition and had pity on His enemies. He gave Himself to make us His friends, to pay for our sins and give us fellowship with Him.

And this is where God's love is not like the world's love. The Lord gives regardless of merit in this world. He loves even those who reject Him. He cares even for those who oppose Him. As it says in Matthew 5, "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous". The full expression of His love came when Jesus died for sinners, when He gave His life on the cross to save His enemies.

And friends, His love does not end there. It continues and overflows into the lives of His people. We have a calling to love as He has loved us. As Jesus laid down His life for us we are to love our friends and enemies alike, even to give our life for them if necessary. This is the deepest expression of mercy. Our life in Christ is based on forgiveness and we are called to forgive as the Lord forgave us.

His love is what carries us through to do His work in this world. The epistle reading here says, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." He redeems us so we may reflect Him in this world so we as the whole church might carry out His work of ministry and bring the Gospel to the lost. To display His compassion to the world so others may be drawn to Christ.

The only way we can do this work is if we remain connected to the source of love itself. And so that is why God has given us Bibles, so we might read and study and grow in Him and learn to apply His teachings to our daily lives. This is why we receive communion, so we might grow in faith and walk with Him more nearly and more closely reflect Him in this world.

Good works and faith are not separate issues. Yes, make no mistake we are saved by grace through faith and the good works we do are to flow out of our faith. They are two sides of the same coin. Luther put it this way, "A truly good work, then, comes from the heart that faith has warmed into walking willingly in the ways of the Lord".

And if we do something good in this world we must remember that it is God's grace working through us doing good things. As Christ says in John 15, "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing". There is no basis for pride in things we do because ultimately, all good things come from our God of grace. As Jesus also says in the 21st verse of the Gospel text, "Whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that His deeds have been carried out in God."

Friends, during this season of Lent we come to the Light of Christ, we return to the Lord our God so we may see clearly in this spiritually dark world. We come to His Light of His Word so we may see that even good things we may have done have been done through Him. Jesus, ultimately, is the basis for everything we do in the church, in our workplaces and at home. He is love at work through His people. Let us remain connected to Him and come to Him always through the Word and Sacraments so we may live and walk in Him on His always. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.