

The Love of God

By the Rev. Dr. John H. Hanson, Deacon

When I was just a little boy in Liberia, my parents made my siblings and me attend church school almost every Sunday. I didn't like church that much, but I loved church school which we called Sunday school to distinguish it from regular weekday school where we learned our ABCs and one-two-three. I love church school because we had a chance to perform in Christmas and Easter pageants and recite Bible verses. My two favorite Bible verses were John 1: 1-5 and John 3:16.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

The second Bible verse was John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

That scripture is part of the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday in Lent and I would like to use it as the text for my sermon on “The Love of God.”

John 3:16 has become so popular that one preacher in St. Petersburg, Florida changed his name to John 3:16. I could not find his original name but I read that he wanted people to know more about that scripture than about him. The flamboyant John 3:16 was an evangelist. He dressed in flashy colored suits with a diamond pin spelling John 3:16 on his lapel. He was a former convict who had become a Christian and then decided to work with alcoholics, addicts and ex-convicts in Christian rescue work. He told the local newspaper that he changed his name to John 3:16, because everyone knows what John 3:16 is and what it means and he wanted it to be the motto for his work.

Everyone here probably knows the scripture, John 3:16, and maybe can recite it better than I can. John 3:16 is the one Bible verse that tells us clearly about God's intention to save us and how God accomplished what God set out to do — God saved us through the life and death of Jesus Christ, God's only Son. This verse also tells us what our human response to the Gospel should be — we receive in faith what God so graciously and freely offers us and in receiving it, we have eternal life.

My friends, God's attitude towards us is love, and that love, is most clearly shown in the gift of Jesus. God's love is so deep for this world and for each one of us that God sent His Son to die for it, for us. It is our sin that sent Jesus to the cross. And, just as the prophet Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole so that the Israelites who were suffering from poisonous snakes could look upon this symbol of death and find life, so Jesus is lifted up on the cross of Calvary.

We who are in the darkness, suffering from sin and evil, look upon Christ crucified and hear the promise of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. God's love for us does not come with any conditions at all. It is while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us, the ungodly.

God loves each one of us just the way we are: from every race, creed, color; gay and straight, etc. No matter whom we are or what we have done, no matter what other people think of us, we are loved by God. And, we are forgiven in Christ and offered life and salvation just as Jesus did for the thief on the cross at Calvary.

Some people think God's grace is cheap because it is free. No, free grace is not cheap grace. John 3:16 puts that so very clearly. God's love and forgiveness come at the price of His Son's life. There is nothing we can do to merit God's gift and there are no strings attached. It is a blessing to receive this free gift. But there are some among us who still refuse to accept God's free and precious gift. Can you believe that? It is like not accepting Oprah Winfrey's free Christmas gift of luxury cars or trips to Hawaii. Can you imagine that?

I am deeply saddened that there are some among us who will turn away from the love of God, some who refuse to accept the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life. The gospel writer, John, puts it this way:

There are some people who love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil—these people condemn themselves because they refuse Christ. They love darkness and reject the light. According to the scriptures, those who do not believe do so not out of ignorance or lack of knowledge or a bad experience in the church so much as their love of the darkness. John says, "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come into the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed." And in some way, we all love the darkness rather than the light. We love ourselves and not others; we love our sinning more than the Savior. Like all others, we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Yet we hear again what a wonderful gift God gave us that first Christmas.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem's stable, a Light was placed to shine in this sin-darkened world. In anticipation of the coming of the Lord Jesus, Isaiah declared, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death; upon them a light has shined" (9:2). John also testified, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

My friends, Light has great power. Light from a headlight can allow you to drive through the darkest and stormiest night safely. Light can scare off a would be attacker. Light, in the form of a laser, allows a surgeon to remove a cataract with great precision. Believe me; I know what I am talking about. I have had three eye surgeries in the past year – two cornea transplants and a retina repair, and so I know what I am talking about.

Because light has great power, Jesus used this image to explain the power He brings to us. Darkness represents the unknown and the chaos in our lives. Of course, the greatest darkness of all is the darkness of sin. Unconfessed sin and especially a life dedicated to sin is full of darkness. The darkness around us can be overwhelming in its enormity. The good news is that

we can continually seek the help of Jesus Christ to find light in the darkness, hope amidst despair, forgiveness in spite of sin.

Every Christian knows how powerful the light of Jesus is and by His light we truly see. What about you? Do you know Jesus the light of the world? Has Jesus brightened your life? Have you encountered Jesus in a personal way? Is there light in your life that keeps you from stumbling in this sin darkened world? If not friend, there is hope for The Light still shines.

May Christ shine through your Lenten journey in such a way that you too might receive and follow the Light of Christ. For He is "the true light which gives light to every man" (John 1:9)

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.