

## Fourth Sunday in Lent Sermon – God shows us how to love

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my rock, and my Redeemer, Amen.

During my time at Princeton Theological Seminary, I was involved in the Lutheran group. One of the events I enjoyed attending is the Table Talks led by a Lutheran pastor on the university's campus. We would have dinner and fellowship for the first 15-25 minutes before diving into our discussion topic. One seminary student who was doing his fieldwork at the Pastor's church led a conversation on what the gospel means to us as Lutherans. Immediately someone responded, "of course, Justification by grace through faith." "Okay, but what does that mean to someone who didn't grow up Lutheran then. I responded, "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." The Seminary student leading the discussion responded, that's what I was going for, but I want to know what that looks like in action. I was surprised by that question because I felt my answer answered this next question as well.

John 3:16 seemed to be the only right answer growing up in Sunday School or confirmation. Most of the lessons seemed to focus on the importance of having faith in believing Jesus and what Jesus did for us. However, it might feel as though John 3:16 verse has become a cliché that the words start to lose their meaning. We might think, okay, I know this already, so what's new. I know God loves me, and I know Jesus died for me so that I am saved, so what else is new? I think what makes this text so much important that even if we were to hear it as much as we might have shown us, there is a reason we need to listen to it repeatedly. It shows us that God does indeed love us if we seem to forget about it when reading stories in the Bible that seem to say otherwise – stories of God punishing Israel through exile or even in our first reading for this morning, punishing Israel for complaining so much. However, God shows love to the Israelites in the story of the snake on the pole by hearing their prayers for repentance, and God listens and responds. God doesn't allow the Israelites to stay in exile with the Babylonians forever but brings them back to Jerusalem and provides opportunities to rebuild their livelihoods. More importantly, God hears the cries of the oppressed and isolated from various communities and sends Jesus to us.

Not only does Jesus die for us so that we may be saved, but Jesus has given us the tools – his words through Scripture, Prayer, and the community to continue the work Jesus began. One of the Book clubs that meet on Monday evenings led by Teresa started reading *Caste: The Origins of Discontent* by Isabel Wilkerson. It looks at the caste system in India, Germany, and, yes, the United States. As we read these stories, we were just heartbroken by the injustices of Dalits known as untouchables in India, Jews in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and African Americans in the United States. At one-point, readings these stories helped us take action differently – one joined NAACP, another wanted to respond to harmful jokes or comments about other races, and some of us want to know what else we can do for the community overall. Our Christian love has shown us the proper response isn't revenge or hostility but supporting the marginalized and the voices that speak out against all kinds' oppression. That is what the love of God has done for us – knowing that we are saved through the sacrifice of God's son, we too should choose to use this example of showing God's love even when the easiest thing to do is

ignore and go on our way like the Levite and lawyer in the story of the Good Samaritan where a man was robbed and left on the road injured, but only the stranger – a Samaritan, an enemy of the Jewish man helps the man in need of treatment.

God's love is like the father of a son who openly welcomed his son after his son squandered all his property. God's love is like the Samaritan who pays the expenses for the treatment of an injured stranger. God's love is the promise that God will never destroy us with another flood in Noah. God's love is continually creating a new and better covenant where God does more for us than we do for God. More importantly, God's love is Jesus dying on the cross but still using his strength to say the words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." God's love is greater than any act of love we can ever imagine. The beautiful thing is God chooses to love us not even when we have hurt God knowingly or unknowingly or have done something or left them undone.

The question is, are we living life knowing this truth that God loves us, and what are we doing with it? John 3:16 might be what we need to hear, but it doesn't say what we are called to do in return for what God has done for us. Rachel Held Evans quotes, "We all go to the text looking for something, and we all have a tendency to find it. So, we have to ask ourselves this: are we reading with the prejudice of love, with Christ as our model, or are we reading with the prejudices of judgment and power, self-interest, and greed? Are we seeking to enslave or liberate, burden or set free?" Although Evans uses this quote to describe how we read the Bible, I think we can also apply it to our lives. "Are we living our lives with the prejudice of love, with Christ as our model, or are we living with the prejudice of judgment and self-interest? Are we seeking to enslave or liberate, burden or set free? As we start to approach the end of the Lenten season, I hope these questions help us figure out the next steps in our faith journey and understand what John 3:16 means for us today.

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