

XXXXXXXXXXXX

## John 3:134-21

March 11, 2018

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church  
1750 Virginia Road  
San Marino, CA 91108  
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185  
*www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com*

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Mike Royko was a news columnist in Chicago. He tells the story of four friends on a fishing trip in Wisconsin at a secluded lake. They fished all day and returned to the cabin at night where they had a few beers and played some cards. Every night they went to bed about 10:00 p.m. and then got up before dawn for more fishing.

One of them, named Joe, was the first to his bunk one night. Exhausted he fell asleep and was snoring within a few minutes. Then one of his friends got an idea. They took Joe's watch off the dresser and changed the time to 4:45 a.m. Then they all got together and changed their own watches, including the alarm clock, to 4:45 a.m. They set the alarm to go off at 5:00 a.m., just 15 minutes later. Then the conspirators turned off the lights, took off their clothes and climbed into bed.

Fifteen minutes later the alarm went off and they all got up and shuffled around making the grumbling sounds that people usually make in the morning. Someone put some toast in and another made the coffee. The only truly miserable one was Joe. He sat on the edge of his bed shaking his head and moaning. He kept looking at his watch and complaining that he felt like he hadn't gotten any sleep. They loaded up the gear and went fishing. "I must be getting old," Joe said once they finally arrived at the fishing hole and dropped anchor. Every so often Joe would glance at the eastern horizon and then his watch and say, "What time have you got?" "5:40" someone would say. "Boy it's dark," Joe would comment. And then a little later, "What time have you got?" "6:00 a.m." someone would say. And Joe began to worry. "Shouldn't it be getting light soon?" By the time his watch said 6:40 he'd stopped fishing. He just sat there staring in the darkness.

Finally with his voice cracking in genuine terror, he cried, "I'm telling you something is wrong! It's not getting light today! It's not getting light! Something is terribly wrong!" "It's the end of the world," his buddies hooted and laughed. One of them said, "It doesn't matter, because the fish aren't biting anyway." Then it dawned on Joe he'd been had. And all things considered, he took it pretty well. Although, they did have to coax an oar out of his hands.

Still, Joe's words are kind of haunting aren't they? "Something's wrong! It's not getting light!" Sometimes life just feels that way. You read the paper and it appears to be getting darker in our world, in our politics and in the way we interact with one another. On this Daylight Saving Day, what light can we expect from the Lord who is "lifted up," according to this Gospel?

John's Gospel begins with the Prologue that says, the "Word" became flesh and dwelt among us. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Light and darkness, you have to choose which direction you want to go. Some people are drawn to the light and others avoid it. Why is that?

This Gospel does not use the word "faith", the noun. Instead you find the word "believe", the verb. It occurs more frequently in John than in any other New Testament writing. The word faith does not appear at all. What we believe matters. Whether we believe matters. There is no neutral ground. Believing is a verb that puts you in life in an active way – not a passive way. It is not assenting to a set of propositions that makes the Christian life. It is looking on the one who is lifted up – on the cross and then in exultation. The shadow of the cross falls over us again in this Lenten season and once again we look upon the Savior of the world who is lifted there.

This is meant to be a double meaning. There is more than one meaning or reference, because there is ambiguity in the reference. Three times in this Gospel there is a reference to being "lifted up." This is the first. The irony is that as Jesus is lifted up on the cross, he is exalted. Paul describes it in Philippians, "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him a name above every name." (Phil. 2:8-9)

The Son of Man must be lifted up, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert. Numbers 21 tells that story.

The people spoke against God and against Moses. Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we

detest this miserable food. Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'<sup>1</sup>

What does this weird story mean? And why does this obscure text appear in John's Gospel just before the most famous verse of the Bible? Just this: When the Gospel of God's love in Christ is lifted up among us, it draws out all our venom and all that poisons the world. It is not enough to simply claim we are loved. God's love also absorbs our greed and selfishness and poison. The glory of God's eternal love for you and for me touches the earth at the cross on Calvary, amidst the vipers and venom of the world. And from that cross, Christ still speaks to us saying, "Let it go!" Let it all go — the backbiting, the venom that corrupts your life and poisons our community and the world. Let it go — all that demeans others and our own humanity. To be drawn again to Christ, to look again at the cross and to believe in him, who loved us and gave himself for us, is to finally let go all the stored up venom that is killing us. Christ can take all the bitterness and bear it away. This biblical story probably has something to do with the symbol for medicine: a snake wrapped around a pole.

God doesn't wait for us to get better before he makes a house call. God is already here among us and with the poisoned and the perishing. When we hear this familiar verse of John 3:16 through the story of the snakes and the cross, we can do one of two things. We can either look away from the cross and, bottling up all the poison that is in us, simply perish; or, looking to the cross and letting loose our deadliest venom, we can begin to live anew. So let it go! Let the venom that is killing you go.

"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. 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." John 3:16 is possibly the most memorized verse of the Bible. It appears regularly in the

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 21:5-8

stands of athletic events simply as John 3:16. It doesn't even need to be written out! But as familiar as the verse is, do we really understand its meaning?

People do not gamble their lives or stake their souls on abstract theories of truth or systems of theology, as important as those may be. Great love is different! People will stake everything on a great love. They will sacrifice everything for the possibility of a great love. And divine love has changed more lives than anything else. The Apostle John lived for it and by it, and so did Paul, and Mary, and Martha. Love is at the heart of the Gospel, at the center of our faith. "In this life we have three lasting qualities – faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of them is love."<sup>2</sup>

Non-believers sometimes understand this even better than Christians. Bertrand Russell, a well-known agnostic in the twentieth century, startled many on the occasion of his 80th birthday when he declared, "The root of the matter is a very simple and old-fashioned thing, a thing so simple that I am almost ashamed to mention it, for fear of the derisive smile with which wise cynics will greet my words. The thing I mean – please forgive me for mentioning it – is love, Christian love. If you feel this, you have a motive for existence, a guide in action, a reason for courage, an imperative necessity for intellectual honesty . . . although you may not find happiness, you will never know the despair of those whose life is aimless and void of purpose."<sup>3</sup>

Christian love provides a motive for existence, a guide for action, a reason for courage and protection from despair and aimless, purposeless living. We're not talking here about a love merely wanting some good things for others. Love goes beyond that! You must be willing to give up something yourself – or to give yourself in order that others may have the good you intend. Real love never stops short at desires. It is always willing to go the length of sacrifice. Too many of us are boxed-up, hoarding ourselves, as though we were keeping something for a great occasion that never comes. God broke the seal in the heart of God and let love flow out on the cross of Christ. On that great occasion, the Lord made a choice — to invest in the world with love. There is no greater power! It brings healing and resolve, overcomes enmity and strife, it is the highest expression of

<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 13: J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English for Schools*, New Revised Edition

<sup>3</sup> Weatherhead, Leslie D., *That Immortal Sea*, p.23.

Christian faith because when we love we share the very nature of God. Like iron that has felt the power of a magnet, and becomes a magnet itself, the heart touched by God's love in Christ loves others.

Jurgen Moltmann put it this way, "If God loves us so much that he is prepared to suffer for us, and from us and with us, then we, too, shall at last be free – free for transformation. We don't have to hold fast to our image of ourselves, or our reputation. For we, ourselves, are held fast and can no longer be lost, so we can unfold and change. No one has to nail a person down to his deeds or misdeeds. We can endure the other person and go with him without imposing our own picture and preconception of him. God's liberty and future have been thrown wide open to us in the community of Christ so we can liberate one another and hold the future open for one another. Because as Jesus has shown, God has pleasure in us, he is pleased to put up with a great deal from us as we wander and stray through life."<sup>4</sup>

Wander and stray through life! It's a good description of many of our lives. That's what people have always done. But God loves us and intends to lift us up. Eternal life is not simply a future prospect but a present reality. Every day we are either moving toward the light or toward the darkness. "Christian love. If you feel this, you have a motive for existence, a guide in action, a reason for courage, an imperative necessity for intellectual honesty."

"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Stop wandering and straying through life! "Believe in God, believe also in me", says the Lord. You will find a reason for living at the foot of the cross, where he is lifted up, and where we find ourselves lifted up too.

Thanks be to God!

---

4 Moltmann, Jurgen, "Accept One Another," in his book of sermons, *The Power of the Powerless*.