

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

11"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

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.

17"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 3:1-17

A number of years ago, my family and I were on vacation in Denver. We decided to go to a Colorado Rockies baseball game. There was this large group of people scattered all over the place as you entered the stadium. They all had on matching t-shirts that had the name of a church on the back. They all had big cardboard signs that said simply, "John 3:16."

Now, I noticed them because there were so many of them and their matching t-shirts were bright yellow. Then I noticed their signs. They weren't saying anything but were just standing silently holding those big signs that said, "John 3:16."

We went into the stadium and found our seats. Just before the game was about to start, I noticed that this group – which I now realized was pretty huge – all came in and sat down in seats in a whole bunch of rows that were below us.

Shortly after that, I noticed an elderly woman who was walking to her seat. She was at the game alone and she had a hot dog in one hand and a glass of beer in the other. She had a huge smile on her face. Between

her facial expressions and the way she was walking, you could tell that she was just tickled pink to be at the game.

When she got to the stairs to head up to her seat, she was faced with a dilemma. She needed to use the handle rail to go up the steep and narrow stairs, but she didn't have a hand free. It was pretty clear that she wasn't going to give up her hotdog or her beer. She stood at the foot of the stairs for a minute or two. I could see that many of the people in the yellow shirts, who had been holding John 3:16 signs, were watching the woman. They were right in the first probably ten rows and were right there and could have helped and, yet, not one did. Finally, from the other side of the stairs a young woman jumped up, took the hotdog and beer from the elderly woman, who then used the handrail, and got to her seat. Once she was seated, the young woman handed her her hotdog and beer. The elderly woman looked like she was in heaven.

What struck me about this situation was that those people had stood outside for who knows how long with big signs that said "John 3:16." You know what the verse says. I just read it in today's gospel. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son so that those who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.

I was struck by the fact that the young woman who helped the elderly woman get to her seat acted more like Jesus than those who were holding signs. The woman who engaged in an act of loving service was more like Jesus than the people who held signs but then watched a neighbor in need and did nothing.

John 3:16 is probably the most famous verse in the Bible. God sent a Son not just to deliver a message, but God sent Jesus to die, to die on a cross, to die on a cross for you and for me. This is why Martin Luther once said this verse is the "gospel in a nutshell."

Notice that God doesn't ask our opinion about this first. God doesn't ask our permission. God doesn't even consult us. God just goes ahead and sends the Son to die....for us.

In verse 17, we hear: Indeed God didn't send a Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God's great love for the world is unconditional, no matter what we do. We can try to negotiate with God. We can threaten to reject God's love. We can even tell God to take a hike if we don't care for God's terms. But when God just loves us – completely and unconditionally – and when God dies for us, there's just nothing we can do to influence God.

God in Jesus has made God's decision and it is FOR us. Yes, we can run. But we can't change the fact that God loves us, that God in fact loves the whole world more than we can imagine.

We are not in control of this relationship. That is good news. Because we are not in control of this relationship – it established wholly by God – we realize it is the one relationship that we can't screw up. God has taken responsibility for this one.

That doesn't mean that we have nothing to do, nothing to contribute to this important relationship. Once we have been loved this fully, this completely, we can respond in love, honoring God and sharing the news of God's love for the world with all we meet. We don't do it by holding up signs that say John 3:16, but we do it by helping our neighbor in need. There is plenty to do. We are messengers, witnesses to what God has done for us.

God has reached out and claimed us. We are God's own. Jesus died on the cross for us. I love the reminder we have of this in 1st John. It says, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are."

We have been baptized into Jesus' death and we have been made alive together with Christ. In the waters of Holy Baptism, God has claimed us as God's own. God has raised us to new life in Jesus Christ.

That doesn't mean that we don't face difficult times. It doesn't mean that we are never afraid. It doesn't mean that things are perfect. It doesn't mean that we don't suffer. It doesn't mean that we are spared from our own sin and the sin of others.

What it does mean is that because of who we are – God's own beloved children – we don't face anything alone. Jesus is always with us. No matter what we face, we can do so with hope because Jesus loves us with a love that is stronger even than death.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that all those who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Those words are so familiar that we don't hear them anymore. But this is God's treasure to the world, the gift God has chosen to give to living creature on the planet. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The treasure that God has offered the world is Jesus Christ.

So often we want to limit that treasure by limiting our ministry to running the church rather than loving, serving, and caring for others.

So often we want to offer judgment instead of forgiveness.

So often we want to dismiss others as unlovable, unrepentant, or unredeemable.

Too often we want to declare other nations as too far away and too different from us to merit our time and witness.

We forget that the gospel doesn't say, "For God so loved the church...". It doesn't say, "For God so loved the United States...". It doesn't say, "For God so loved Lutherans...". We know that it doesn't, but we forget.

It says, "For God so loved the world, so that everyone who believes in the Augsburg Confession." No, it doesn't say that. It says, "For God so loved the world, so that everyone who believes what I believe." No. It doesn't say that either.

Jesus is God's treasure offered to the world.

Unfortunately, the church has spent centuries trying to lock up God's treasure. We look it behind church rules. We keep it in a vault of how we've always done it.

But it's God's treasure to give. We are called to disburse it...not to hoard it or fence it in or encase it or embalm it.

During this season of Lent, we are given the luxury of looking at ourselves and seeing what we lack.

The season of Lent leads us to the foot of the cross, to bring us to our knees in gratitude and awe at the love that flowed from the cross of Christ.

May this Lent be a time of new beginning.

For God so love the world that he gave his only Son so that all those who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Amen.