

14 Mar 2021, Lent 4; Numbers 21:4–9; Ephesians 2:1–10; John 3:14–21

Picking up a paper that I wrote for seminary a few years ago, I looked at it and wondered – who in their right mind talks like this?

The phrase that struck me was something like, “the existential experience of the eschatological reality in present and future.” I mean, who talks like that? Who even thinks like that?

And what do those words mean? Oh I could tell you. They are a fancy way of speaking about what you know already – that you can know what it means to be alive in Christ, but you won't know it completely until you see him face to face.

About the same time I wrote that paper, I was doing a lot of supply preaching. It is one of the things that people in seminary get to do – it gives more experience – when you are in the last year of seminary and kinda helps put money in the pocket, when you are a student, without much income.

One of the places I got to preach was Gilfillin Minnesota, a small farming town not far from where my late wife's relatives lived.

Rachel's grandparents and Aunt Trish and Uncle Jim came to the church – to hear me preach. At the end of the service, Trish said something I will always remember – though I haven't always taken it to heart. It was great wisdom, that I wish I would always remember though.

She said, “Liked the sermon, was about the right amount of time. But just wait a year or two, and you will turn that in to 30 minutes that is totally un-understandable.”

Too often, we preachers are guilty of just that...not keeping it simple enough for our own selves to follow...much less the people sitting in the pews.

Make it simple, make it plain. That is what Jesus does here in this passage from John.

That's what Jesus does here in this passage from John. He makes it simple. Nicodemus, a very learned teacher of the law, a Pharisee, a respected religious leader, came to Jesus asking about the Kingdom of God. Jesus told him that he must be born again, but Nicodemus misunderstood. So Jesus explained it to him and made it plain.

Today's gospel text, John 3:14-21, is part of that explanation. And Jesus makes it so plain that John 3:16 is often quoted as a summary of the Christian faith. Jesus makes it simple, but so often we don't. In our sophisticated attempts to understand the gospel we make it more complicated - and in the process we completely lose sight of the original point.

The first point we lose sight of is that "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son." It doesn't say that God kind of liked the world.

It certainly doesn't say that God could care less for the world, but some might think that from the church's lack of care for the world.

It doesn't say that God felt sorry for the world, yet pity is the deepest emotion some "church people" feel for the world.

It doesn't even say that God had a warm fuzzy feeling about the world, even though for some "a warm fuzzy" is their definition of love.

It says that God "so loved the world."

In fact he loved it so much that he what? . . .

What did he do because he loved the world? . . .

Yes, he gave his only begotten Son.

God didn't just send Jesus to the world like you send a child to camp - God sent him to die. Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, came to suffer and die for the world.

I've been struggling this week to come up with a definition of "so loved." And words seem to fail me. How do I express the depth and breadth of God's love?

But Jesus made it plain. He simply said, "My Father loves you this much" then he spread his arms on the cross and died. Yet we lose sight of this fact. We forget that God's love came first. The whole Christian religion, the whole Christian church, who we are as God's people - even our salvation - is the direct result of God's love."

For God SO LOVED the world that he GAVE his only begotten Son!"

The second point we often lose sight of is that "everyone who believes in him shall have eternal life."

This is more than accepting certain doctrines about Jesus - like he is the Son of God, and that he rose from the dead.

That is "believing things about Jesus" - this speaks of "believing in Jesus" - not just about Jesus.

It is a matter of trust.

Maybe another way to get the point across is "everyone who trusts in Jesus shall have eternal life."

But that is too simple for most people. Like Nicodemus we wonder if there must be more. So people do more than wonder, they "make up" more. They come up with tests of doctrine and faith. They ask if you are "pro" this or "anti" that - and if you answer wrong they decide you are not a believer.

They make a list of fundamental doctrines - and no matter how much you place your faith in Jesus - if you don't ascribe to those fundamentals of the faith, they judge you as unsaved and damned to hell.

Sometimes people think that if you don't go through the right rituals you don't have eternal life, they decide that you are unsaved because your church baptizes in the wrong way, or serves communion in the wrong way, or that you must be lost because your church ordains women - or because it doesn't ordain women.

But Jesus made it plain. "Everyone who believes in him shall have eternal life." It's simply a matter of trusting in Jesus.

Now don't get me wrong - doctrine and rituals and practices - all of them are important. But they are an issue of serving God rightly not of receiving eternal life. The only thing necessary for eternal life is faith in Jesus.

The third point we often lose sight of is that "God sent his Son not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him."

We Christians really do a bad job of remembering this one. We're so busy condemning the ways of the world, that we forget to try to save it.

A famous evangelist once said, "You have to get them lost to get them found."

It is true that sometimes people have to be convinced of their sin - especially in the permissive "anything goes" society we live in. But frankly, sometimes the church is so busy getting people lost - that we forget that our real goal is to get them found!

Why is it that so many in our society see traditional Christians as the enemy?

Of course we oppose sinful and hurtful life styles - but if we were ministering to the world rightly, they would see us as well meaning people who disagreed with them.

Instead, they see the church as hateful - because we are so busy condemning - that we forget to be about the business of saving. Yes we need to stand for what is right and what is wrong, but not at the expense of failing to offer salvation!

Jesus made it plain, "Those who dwell in darkness are condemned already" -so he came to save them. And if God sent his only begotten Son to save the world and not condemn it - then we should go forth for the same purpose.

We should go into the world to save, to offer hope and love and strength. Yet too often we go forth to condemn. Or because we are exhausted from all of this covid-world stuff, we just don't go forth at all.

At this point some of you might be wanting to say, "Make it simple preacher, make it plain."

Well Jesus already made it very plain! God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son to die on a cross. Out of love he did this so that everyone who believes - who trusts - in him would not perish but have eternal life.

He didn't do this to have an excuse to send people to Hell - because we were all headed there anyway. He did it to have a way to bring people to heaven. He came for you - because he "so loved" you. He came that you might know his love and glory for all eternity. Jesus is your Lord and Savior - that is, after all is said and done, the pure and simple truth about why he came.

So, as those who are already being saved - who already believe in Jesus - we are called to follow his example of love. Go into the world not to condemn - but to save. Live your life so that others might see the light of God's love in you, and be saved through Christ.

If God so loved the world that he sacrificed his life for it, shouldn't we love it enough to make sacrifices too?