

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 15, 2015

Text: John 3:14–21

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Isn't it cute to see starry-eyed young girls pulling the petals of flowers saying, "He loves, he loves me not." When the last petal ends with "he loves me not" there's a flicker of frustration but no worries, you get another flower. Isn't it a marvel to watch brash young men playing the part of a shining knight in armor or fearless conqueror of the world in order to demonstrate the love he has for his cherished young maiden?

And then there's us older folks. We show love to our spouses in less than spectacular ways. I'll change the diaper this time, honey. Stay in bed for a while longer. Oh there's the occasional special gift or the unexpected event. But, demonstrations of love take on a much humbler appearance but often have weightier substance.

"Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so" says the Sunday School song. And true enough. The Bible tells us in numerous places that God's steadfast love for His people endures forever. But the answer to whether or not God loves us shouldn't be first answered with reference to a book, not even the "Good Book" but to a person: the Lord Jesus Christ. And not just to any moment in the Lord Jesus' life but to His crucifixion on Good Friday under Pontus Pilate. God loves me because Jesus died for me. That's the best answer, the eternal answer to how we know God loves you, me, and all 7 billion people living on this beautiful world.

God's demonstration of love takes on a much humbler appearance in Jesus' death. At the same time, however, that humble action contains an exceedingly weighty substance of divine love, an inexhaustible love which endures for eternity.

The apostle John wrote, quite possibly, the most famous passage of Scripture, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (vs. 16). God's love is shown, demonstrated, seen, and experienced in the giving of the Son. Not in the proclamation of a book, a revelation, a dream, or any other kind of mystical experience but in the giving of a person. Jesus.

The aim of God's love is pure and simple: salvation and eternal life. Without receiving God's love, one will only find the opposite: damnation and eternal death. The Biblical description of life in this world is there are two ways: the way of life and salvation and the way of death and damnation. The narrow way or the broad way is how the Lord Jesus describes it at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The narrow way is the path of divine love, repentance, faith, hope, prayer, and patience. The broad way is the path of selfishness, vice, meanness, iniquity, and frivolity. There is no middle ground, as far as the Bible is concerned.

God's love for this broken, messed up world is funneled into a single event: the giving of God's Son into death and resurrection. All of human history moved into and out of that grand event. We get a glimpse of that in today's OT reading from Number 21. On the surface, this account in Israel's history is about a grumpy, complaining people tired of wandering in the desert (for 40 years) and eating manna (also 40 years). Try to imagine that for a moment. Endless wandering, same ol food day after day. Shortages of water. Burning heat. Burying your loved ones and having to leave them behind. You might get a bit grumpy too.

But that's just a superficial reading. What's really the issue is their complaining against God's gift and His will for their lives. They were discontent with God's love revealed in Moses' leadership and His intercessory ministry, a picture of Jesus' ministry; they were weary of daily manna which was a picture of Jesus the bread of life, and they lost sight of the hope of an eternal Promised Land that transcends the geographical land of Palestine. An evil heart of unbelief grew in their souls and it grew like a festering canker.

Fiery snakes infested Israel's camp. A great many of Israel's people died. They cried out to the Lord for salvation. They appealed, yet again, to God's love to save them in spite of themselves and their hardhearted ways. And the Lord heard their cry. That's amazing in itself. God's answer is all the more mysterious. "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live" (vs. 8).

The sign and symbol of God's love looks eerily like the problem. Snakes are slithering around biting people. And God says make a bronze serpent. All who are bitten who look at that serpent, and only that serpent, will be saved and live. Snakes are the problem. A single snake is the solution. Divine love shown in a most unexpected way.

The apostle John says that event in OT Israel's history was yet another picture of the Lord Jesus. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (vs. 14–15). Curious indeed. God the Father's final, authoritative action of love is seen in the lifting up of God's Son on the pole of Calvary's Cross! It looks suspiciously like the problem: death.

Love is seen in death?! Yes, indeed. God's love is seen in the giving of the Son into death. Part of our difficulty is that we've become muddled in our thinking about love. Biblical love, true love, the love that flows from the God who is love is self-giving, self-sacrificing. God's perfect love transcends mere feelings and good thoughts. He loves perfectly in that He gives completely without regard for Himself. God the Holy Trinity never thought death by crucifixion was below their divine status or degrading to their persons.

No, they loved this crazy world with all of its evil, dysfunction, and chaos. Don't be too eager to cast off this world. God loves it so much that He saved it in His Son. And don't be so quick to think this or that person is beyond the love of God. For that person isn't. Paul even says in today's epistle reading, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved..." (vs. 4–5).

How do you know God loves you? Jesus died for you. That's the best way to answer that most important question. Jesus, God's Son, love me and you so much that He would not be parted from us. He saves us to the uttermost because He loves us to the uttermost.

You are the beloved of the Lord. Live and prosper in that perfect, divine love.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.