

“The Way to Freedom”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 11, 2018

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air; the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

John 3:14-21

And just 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. 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.

‘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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us have within, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words we have heard read from scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word of Christ dwell within us. Let it feed us. Let it guide us. Let it comfort us. And let it challenge us so that we might be your people, that we might be your people trusting in your goodness at work in our lives and at work through us in the world. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

So every now and then, as I stand at the back of the sanctuary after a worship service, someone comes up to me and says, "Dr. Holyan, Dr. Holyan, can I get a copy of that sermon? I want to send it to a relative of mine." And I say to them, "Well, you can get it on Tuesday after it's transcribed because I don't have it written out. I don't know what I said, but I know that it's been recorded and we send it off to get the words transcribed. And it'll come back-- it'll be ready on Tuesday." And they kind of look at me like, "You don't write it down." And I said, "No. It'll be fine." I said, "Well, what are you going to do with the sermon?" "Oh, why, I've got this cousin, you see, they're a Christian, but they're always trying to save me. Whenever we talk about religion or faith or Jesus, it just doesn't work. I don't have the right answers according to them. They seem to think that it's all about having the right answer and saying the right thing. And you talk and preach a lot about loving God and trusting, and I want them to read the sermon." And I think to myself, "Don't weaponize what I say, please. Be gentle with it," but I get the point. Because I don't know about you, but I have people in my life that are praying for me right now that I will be saved because I don't have the right answers according to them.

One of the questions that I get asked sometimes is, "Do you love Jesus?" I've even been asked it in this church dressed like this. "Do you love Jesus?" "No. I gave up being a surgeon because I thought the pay would be better being a pastor [laughter]. No. I decided to put my family through turmoil when our kids were little by going all the way across the country to go to seminary because I thought it would be fun." "Do you love Jesus?" Do any of you ever get asked that question? I finally realized that it's okay to be honest. And when I'm honest, it's actually fun to watch the reaction on people's face do you love Jesus, I get asked, and my answer is, "I don't understand the question. What do you mean do I love Jesus?" Usually, the person asking it is completely flabbergasted by that response, and they sputter and try to find something else to say. And as they're sputtering, I say to them, "I'm not really sure what answer you're looking for, but this I know for sure. God loves me, and I know that God loves you." And they kind of hem and haw, and eventually we decide in silence just to part ways and keep on moving in our respective lives.

I used to think that the divisions between myself and those that are more conservative were sort of deeply entrenched and really supported and fully embedded, if you will, in scripture, that there's this-- again and again, even in today's passage, there's this clear line between light and dark and life and death, and that it's that obvious, if you will. And then I reexamined probably the most known verse in all of scripture, at least the most publicized if you watch any NFL football game. 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. And as I sat with this passage, this line if you will, wondering what is it saying and how does it help me understand this tension or dilemma that often many of us find ourselves in, especially with relatives who think they know the right answers and who are praying for our salvation.

The image that came to me was the image of a Turkey Day football game. Webster Groves, the arch-enemy of Kirkwood Pioneers. It's a Thursday in November, kind of like right now outside. It's dark and there's snow blowing. And it's cold, and you've all been having coffee and cinnamon rolls, and you're hunkering up, putting on your coat and your hat. And you can smell the turkey as you head out the door to go to the football game. And the football game's been a really good game. It's halftime and things are going great. And then in the third quarter, the Pioneers go ahead by seven. And then at the fourth quarter, the Statesmen come back, and now they're ahead. They've scored a touchdown and a field goal, so they're ahead by three. There's two minutes to go, and then the coach of Kirkwood calls a timeout because Kirkwood's just recovered a fumble on the 30-yard line of the Statesmen. They've got 70 yards to go, less than two minutes. And the coach calls a timeout. Now, if you're the Gospel writer of John, and you're playing this scenario out about a football game, one of the things you need to know about the Gospel writer is they're not shy about advocating for their position. So they lay things out in these very stark times, light and dark, life and death, condemnation and salvation. And the image came to me. What would happen if the coach at that moment decided, "You know what? I'm not going to be the coach. I'm going to be a good stereotypical Christian, the kind that we can make fun of.

Imagine the coach gathering his team together, less than two minutes to go, the opportunity to win the turkey-day game, kneeling in front of his offense and saying, "Well, you know guys, it's been a good season so far. We haven't done great but we've tried hard. And you know what? We've tried hard enough. Let's just take a knee for four times and call it a day. Let's just go home and have turkey. I mean, after all, it's the turkey-day game. Who wants to be out here when it's snowing? I don't. Let's go." No, coach is not going to do that. Instead, the coach is going to get in your face, he's going to rile them up. "Come on, Pioneers, we've got to beat the Statesmen, because they're our arch enemies. We've got to do this. Let's go." And all of that energy is about getting his team motivated to do what they need to do to win. So this language in the Gospel of John is doing exactly that. The writer is trying to get his team motivated to do what he knows they need to do to win. Which is why we have all this stark language. He wants to make his point abundantly clear. And in the midst of all that, there's this famous 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. And as I say that, thinking about the coaching way of reading it, I think you better believe or else. And in a sense, that's exactly what he says. Those who believe in him are not condemned but those who do not believe are condemned already. And part of me thinks, "Oh my gosh, my cousin is right."

But if you lay that line out, "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", it's on a teeter-totter. What I've come to realize is that we as Presbyterians in the reformed tradition have always put our emphasis on the love of God. For God so loved the world, full stop right there. And people like my cousin put their emphasis on, so that everyone who believes in him, full stop right there.

And we're both right. And this one sentence where we put an emphasis on one side and others put it on the other side, this one sentence, because of our emphasis divides Christianity--divides us, often, from our friends and our family, because while we focus on loving God, they focus on believing in Jesus and, for some reason, we cannot come together.

But what happens if we hold it together? What happens when we embrace our emphasis without judging that of the other? What happens when we honor this love of God that is ours and is at work within us, among us, and through us? It doesn't make it easier to talk with those who hold us in judgment and deem us to be unworthy of the faith that we proclaim. But what it does do is guide us in our actions, in our words, and in our behavior. As Karen read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians even Paul, the king of drawing those lines so clearly between one way or the other, says that but God who is rich in mercy out of great love with which he loved us made us alive together with Christ. By grace, you've been saved. Even Paul puts the emphasis on love before he ramps out or ramps up any of the demands of what that means for us to live our lives.

So the question that I conclude with is what do we do with John 3:16 as a Lenten invitation for each of us? And as I sat with that and wondered what might be our invitation, I was drawn to 1st John in the third chapter. We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And so for us who emphasize God's love more than a rigid doctrine of assent, in the season of Lent maybe we who have much of the world's goods are invited to consider how we might use them to provide relief for those in need. We might be invited to think how what we have and what we do can actually help another person. How we can put God's love into all that we say and all that we do. When we do this, we have the living God, the spirit of Christ within us. Amen