

Richard Davenport  
March 11, 2018 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: *John 3:14-21* (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

**Footnotes:**

- a. John 3:14 The Greek for *lifted up* also means *exalted*.
- b. John 3:15 Some interpreters end the quotation with verse 21.

Ah love, what a remarkable thing. We have so many stories about love, many from fiction, many from history. Some come to us from ancient times, but they continue to be written too. Paul McCartney sings, “some people want to fill the world with silly love songs, and what’s wrong with that?” Most Disney movies focus on love in one way or another, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, *The Little Mermaid*, and many others. We sing about it, we tell stories about it. It’s the topic we discuss more than any other because it’s the most essential, most basic need we all have.

So much of our society and culture is built around love in one way or another. The family unit is forged in love, husband with wife, parents with kids, extended families too, all interwoven in loving relationships. That ever-deepening love that continues year after year and grows as we learn more about the other and share our lives with them.

So much of our younger years are spent searching for love, that one person who we can connect with, who will love us the way we want and need to be loved and who we can love in return. We don’t want to be one, but two. A couple whose lives are intertwined. Maybe we look for more as well, a family, kids who grow and reflect our love for them, going out into the world carrying everything we have given them.

With all of this love, it’s only natural we’d find God talking about it too. “For God so

loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” The passage that’s usually used as the summary of the whole gospel. If you only have time for one Bible verse, this one will at least get you in the ballpark. If you have Bible tracts or you’re talking to someone and sharing the gospel, this is probably the one verse you’ll always have ready to use.

It has it all, or at least most of what you need. Love, faith, Jesus, all right there together. Though Luther was known for writing quite a lot, it’s telling that he spends 25 pages of his John commentary just talking about this one verse and probably would have written much more if he wasn’t trying to get through the whole gospel. He does spend a lot of time talking about monks, the pope, and the Muslims, but the point of all of it is God and his love.

This verse captures the essence of the Gospel. It captures the simplicity, which is partly what Luther is so keen on explaining. If you believe, you live. That’s all there is to it. It really is the simplest possible answer to all of those big questions like, “what happens to me when I die?” Simple, trust in Christ and you live forever. It’s so simple it almost sounds too easy, like it should have a catch. But no, God loves you and wants you to live forever, so just trust in Christ.

It really doesn’t get any better and yet most of the time if you talk about John 3:16 with a non-believer they won’t have any interest in it at all. They won’t want to talk to you. They’ll think you’re stupid and the passage is a waste of time and they’ll walk away. You’ll go to the effort of trying to share this wonderful statement of love with them and they’ll ignore you and walk away, leaving you there wondering what the problem is.

It happens a lot. It’s so simple and yet no one wants to talk about it or listen to it. It’s about love, the one thing we all want, but that doesn’t seem to matter. Those folks aren’t any different. They want love just like everyone else. It sounds so strange, but when you look at the kinds of love people find out in the world, perhaps it’s a little more understandable.

We seek out love from the very beginning. Infants look to mom and dad for love. It’s such a basic need we all have, and yet so many children go without it. It’s more than just care and basic necessities they want, it’s someone to love them. They need that love, but in many families they get abuse and neglect. What should be there, what we expect to be there is instead a black haze of bitterness and anger. Those children that survive will spend the rest of their lives trying to overcome what was done to them. Many will take this twisted view of love and family

they've been given and carry it on to their own families. Many will even claim they do it out of love because that's the only love they know.

Other families will say they love one another but each person will be so wrapped up in what they're doing in their own lives that their contact with the rest will be infrequent at best. Kids who hardly know their parents because they never spend time together. Husbands and wives who rarely do more than wave to each other in passing. This isn't about those situations we are forced into sometimes, where life doesn't let us function the way we want. This is about families who disconnect out of apathy or neglect and just let it all go. They share the same space but their relationship has faded away. The old song, "Cat's in the Cradle," by Harry Chapin tells the sad story of a father who never took time for his son while he was growing up and now his grown son lives the way he learned from his father, by disconnecting and thinking that minimal contact is normal.

The marital relationship suffers from this twisted understanding of love in more ways than one. A husband and wife come together because they're in love. Their spouse makes them feel good, makes them happy. Life is better with them. You can't imagine being with anyone else or living without them. Time goes on. Life gets either too stressful or too monotonous and that feeling fades. Life with your spouse becomes one of tension or indifference. The love has disappeared from the relationship. Maybe you even find you love someone else instead and being with him or her is all you want now. Love is fading. Love is fickle. Love is fragile. Again, two people sharing the same space but who no longer relate to one another anymore.

Teenagers have always had problems with depression and suicide. High school is a confusing time as kids start to learn what it means to be adults and they have to cope with all of the changes going on. That trend has gone up considerably in recent years with the advent of smart phones and social media. Teens, girls especially, with kind and loving parents are still killing themselves. A look at their social media shows their peers making fun of them or excluding them. Despite their loving parents, these teens feel no one cares and no one wants them. The parents' love just isn't strong enough to save their children.

We all want love, but the love we give and the love we get falls far short of the romantic ideals. So it's no surprise that when we talk about God's love we're met with skepticism. How can we share a love with people when we don't even live it out ourselves? Looking at us, how abusive our own love looks, why would anyone think God's love is any different?

Our first real failing is thinking our love is what love ought to be. The hardship and effort it would take to display real love in our lives. In fact we keep wanting more and more because we fall so far short of the ideal that we are always searching, trying to find that perfect love.

We're all just a bunch of angry, hateful, selfish people who demand perfect love but are incapable and unwilling to give it to anyone else. Looking at us, God should just wipe us out and start over with people who are willing to share that love, but he doesn't. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The Father loves you so much that he's willing to give up his own Son in exchange for you. He's willing to sentence his own Son to death. That's what real love looks like. It looks like sacrifice. It's giving up what you want for the benefit of someone else. It's a love that doesn't fade. It is always there ready to give. It's a love that isn't fickle. It isn't going to go after someone or something else. It isn't fragile. It is always giving the utmost.

The passage continues, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." We should be destroyed. We should be thrown away. We should suffer for all of the pain and grief we bring into the world. Instead Jesus takes the cross off of our shoulders and carries it on his torn and bloody back up the path to the top of the mountain where he dies the death we deserve. This is love. This is the Father giving his Son. This is the Son giving his life. This is the kind of love the world doesn't know.

Believing in Jesus isn't a matter of just knowing Jesus died, or even that he died for me. It's looking at your life and seeing how far short of real love you come. It's realizing you will never show that pure, true, self-giving love to a single person even once in your life. It's seeing that the only way you will ever show real love to anyone is if God loves through you and trusting he will do just that.

Jesus journeys to the cross here in the season of Lent. He comes to save his people from their sins. His death means life for us. St. John is telling us there's more at stake as Jesus hangs on the cross. Jesus brings love into a world that doesn't know how. He shows us what love is so we know how to love again.

Jesus shows us the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love we are to have for one another. We do fall short, repeatedly, but trusting in God and seeing what he has done for us

is how his love starts showing through in our lives. Hearing him forgive us, and continue forgiving us for our many failures, brings that love to light in our lives. Some may come to faith by hearing the words of the Gospel there. Many more will come to faith by seeing those words put into action as we share the kind of love the Father has shown us, giving of ourselves to care for the needs of others.

This is what we look forward to in Lent. It is more than a story of Jesus death or even his resurrection. It is the story of love coming into the world.