



## HALFTIME IN LENT

March 4, 2018, The Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 3:14-21

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Long before I ever met anyone from The Brick Presbyterian Church, I had heard of you. I heard of your long and storied history and the well-known names of former ministers of this congregation. I learned of your careful and thoughtful attention to worship in the grand Reformed tradition. I was told of your exquisite architecture and how from the smallest details to the soaring heights all things blend to offer glory to God. When I arrived for my first official visit as the Transitional Senior Minister, none other than Ellsworth G. Stanton III was waiting. His first words of welcome were these: “I have ordered a set of Geneva tabs for you.” I knew I would be just fine.

So, with all of that, there could be no doubt that you, as a congregation, would observe the cycle of the Christian year from Advent to Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday, as it is now often called. But I must tell you I still had no idea just *how liturgically sophisticated* you are until recently. When I learned that deep into this somber season of Lent—a season of introspection and discipline and even fasting—you had planned an evening of sumptuous feasting, conviviality, even dancing...well, I marveled at your liturgical savvy. *How did they know*, I wondered, that this very weekend, the fourth Sunday of Lent, is known as Refreshment Sunday? In Latin, it is Laetare, meaning ‘joy’ or ‘rejoice.’ How did you all know that halfway through Lent the church allows, even encourages, a break in the long season of solemnity? A brief respite when feasting replaces fasting; when joy bubbles up like champagne in anticipation of Easter! In some traditions, even the paraments lighten in color from purple to rose—though I did



not suggest to Doug that we wear pink stoles today. I am in awe that you planned this year's Dinner Dance at just the right liturgical moment!

Even the gospel reading for today, at least the first half of it, strikes a lighter tone from the usual somber Lenten themes. This is a text that begins mid-sentence in the middle of a conversation that began verses ago between Jesus and Nicodemus—though by this point Nicodemus has faded back into the evening shadows from which he came—and Jesus seems to be speaking to a much wider audience. The twice-repeated words, “eternal life” and “eternal life” surround the announcement of God’s enormous love for the world. On this Refreshment Sunday, we have been given the spinning ballroom globe of John 3:16, casting shards of light all around us in this great sanctuary.

John 3:16 is surely, for Christians, the most well-known verse in the New Testament, if not the whole Bible. Martin Luther called this single verse “the little Bible” or “the gospel in miniature.”<sup>1</sup> Many of us memorized it in the King James Version: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” But in some hands, this verse about God’s generosity of love becomes instead a penurious accounting of how well or faithfully we “believeth in him.” In other words, the emphasis shifts from God to us, becoming a verse that hints of punitive warning rather than prodigal welcoming. Painted on boards, tacked to trees along the road, it warns of danger ahead unless you believe in him...and believe enough.

Sometimes we convict ourselves for our lack of belief and failures that seem an impossible hurdle to overcome. Some years ago I read the novel, *Break the Heart of Me*. It tells the story of Sylvia, trying to escape her fundamentalist upbringing and past trauma. A fledgling songwriter from a small town, Sylvia lived the kind of eccentric and tragic life we Southerners seem especially good at, and at one point she reflects on her personal history with these words: “...the last thing I need is my sins tracking me down and finding me out. Sometimes you got to ask God’s forgiveness and forget about them and hope they forget about you. Though your

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



sins be like scarlet he will wash them as white as snow and cast them into the furthestest sea, and you just hope they can't swim.”<sup>ii</sup>

Sometimes, though, it is other people we are all too willing to convict and condemn. I can still remember sitting in my seminary theology class decades ago. We were studying doctrines like sin and grace and salvation when one student seemed especially concerned that sinful people would indeed be punished. He wanted to ensure our professor was not endorsing the concept of “universal salvation.” Some will be saved, but some will not, he wanted to hear. And I’m reasonably sure he counted himself among the already-saved with a pretty firm notion, too, of who were not. Our professor, Shirley Guthrie, was a man of gentle grace and patience, but he had listened long enough. Shirley finally looked at all of us and said in his slow, emphatic drawl, “Look, God is not out to ‘get’ you. God is *for* us. Not against us.” I was riveted by those words...hearing them in a new and profound way that day—though they were the well-worn words of today’s text. Suddenly they were uttered afresh to me in that classroom. And that central truth of “the gospel in miniature” has remained a bedrock belief for me ever since. In a world, and even within the church, that can seem preoccupied with judgment rather than mercy, with a God who “tracks us down and finds us out,” here is a word of confident love and grace that releases us from personal terror and releases us, too, from the seat of judgment we so often like to occupy.

Friends, God loves the world. God is for us, not against us. God has sent the Son not to do us in, but to give us the gift of eternal life. Not to condemn the world, but to save it, for heaven’s sake. On Refreshment Sunday, this is the good news at the center of our text. It is the good news at the center of our lives. It is the good news that centers the world.

But it is still Lent, so there is a somber, even hard-edged content to this good news as well.

One writer suggests that John 3:16 suffers from its familiarity. The standard English translation lulls us, obscuring the shocking clash set up in the original

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Greek. An ungrammatical but literal translation would sound more like this: “for so loved God the world.” Here, ‘**God**’ and ‘**the world**’ are purposely put side by side, offering a verbal and theological collision. In the Gospel of John, you see, ‘the world’ or *kosmos* is not God’s good creation, instead it is the God-hating world.<sup>iii</sup> It is the pervasive, universal force at work toward evil, destruction and death. It is the world that chooses, again and again, darkness rather than light. This version of the world is featured relentlessly on every new channel. It is the world that garners our horrified attention and feeds on our fears, stoking our suspicions. It is the world captured in a recent photograph of a young Syrian girl, maybe 4 or 5 years old. She stands looking off in the distance, but the terror is not far away enough. Her brows furrowed, her eyes narrowed, in her arm she holds her doll and shields its eyes with her hand though she cannot shield her own.<sup>iv</sup>

So, John 3:16 is not some squishy version of love. No, instead it is a quite determined kind of love. God loves the world so much, loves even the very forces of the world that hate and resist and reject the light God brings, that God does something about it. God acts in an astounding way. Verse 17 takes us deeper: God sends God’s own beloved Son into this world. He lived before us an alternative way of life and still invites us to join him in it. God does this not to condemn the world...quite the opposite! God acts in love to *save* the world from its own destructive habits and deathly ways. It is not just for some of us, but for all of us—the whole *kosmos*, that God offers eternal life. And in John, that is not squishy either—eternal life. Like some sweet reward at the end for those who have believed enough. No, in this Gospel, eternal life is what the other gospel writers call the kingdom of God. God wants us all to live right here, right now, in ways that exhibit the kingdom values; to live with generously the abundant, eternal life God gives now and intends for everyone, even those dead set against it.

Believers in Jesus, you and I are not invited into something casual or easy at all. We are instead called to do something...to act in ways that are astounding: To love as God loves, to live as Jesus lived. To look for Christ shining into every place of darkness and then bear his light wherever and whenever we can. Despite all evidence to the contrary, we are to keep living the eternal life God intends right



here, right now. As John 3:21 puts it, we are to come to the light and do what is true; all our deeds done in God. Now, you and I can dare to live in such a way because even when the Son is lifted up on the cross, and the *kosmos* is at its full display of power, we know evil is no match for the power of God. For as the Son is lifted up on the cross to death, he is also lifted to resurrection and ascension over all things. With God, there is always more than we have yet imagined, not only for ourselves but even for those who love darkness, whose deeds are evil. So perhaps hardest of all, we are called to pray for the salvation of the whole world and to practice forgiveness, even when it is not warranted from where we stand how we judge things.

God is for us and not against us. All of us and every last one of us. This good news of forgiveness and generous love is as vast as the *kosmos*. And it is also personal.

Twenty-two years after that day in Shirley Guthrie's theology class, he had one last lesson to teach. Dying of cancer, Shirley decided not to pursue treatments that could not cure him. Instead, he and his wife, Vivian, welcomed visitors – colleagues, friends, former students – and made space for conversation and laughter and tears in the face of death. The President of the Seminary went to see Shirley one last time. They spoke of his approaching death and Laura Mendenhall told Shirley he seemed to be at peace. She later wrote, "His eyes twinkled, and with amazement in his voice he said, 'Yes, and the peace is bigger than I imagined.'" He went on to tell her that he had quit worrying about teaching, making presentations and writing books—about what he ought to do, "Can you imagine that?" he asked.

Laura asked him if he wished now that he had let go of all these worries sooner and he replied, "Probably, though I didn't." And then, she recalled, it was if Shirley and God had just been in conversation, because Shirley said next, "Those things are not as important to God as I thought. It's all about forgiveness."<sup>v</sup> This is what God desires us to receive. For ourselves and to grant it to others, too, as we are able.



Friends, on this Refreshment Sunday, it is good to let a little Easter bubble up among us like champagne in a glass overflowing. It brightens like purple turning to pink, this good news of the gospel. The astounding news that God is for us and not against us. That, in fact, so loves God the world, that God sent the Son not to condemn the world, but that the whole world, including where evil seems to be in charge, might not perish, but be saved and receive the gift of eternal life. May we, then, live with the confidence that this gospel is true, until all of our deeds are done in God, and heaven and earth are one.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> The attribution of the phrase, “the gospel in miniature,” to Martin Luther is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to find an exact citation from Luther’s work. At least one source says it is actually a phrase that should be attributed to A. T. Robinson.

<sup>ii</sup> Elizabeth Dewberry Vaughn, **Break the Heart of Me** (Nan A. Talese Publisher, 1995), 120.

<sup>iii</sup> John P. Meier, “The Johannine Kerygma: Good News or Bad News?” in *Mid-Stream*, May 2002, 38.



<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>v</sup> From a letter Laura Mendenhall wrote November 2, 2004, to supporters of Columbia Theological Seminary following Shirley’s death.