

Reflection on the Word: Lent 4, March 11.18 John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-15

Today's gospel contains what is probably the world's most famous Bible verse – 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 have eternal life."

It is a verse that has been translated into more languages than any other; a verse millions of children have memorized before any other; a verse which people at major sporting events hold up on big cards, sometimes with just the words John 3:16, expecting that everyone will know what they are referring to.

Martin Luther once said, this verse is "the gospel in a nutshell."

It speaks of a love that is unconditional and inclusive ... a love unlike any human love. It's a love we had nothing to do with, cannot influence, and cannot control. It's not a love we negotiate or buy, according to our good deeds; it is a love that is there for us and for the whole world, because of the abundant grace of God.

Many of you who remember the comic strip Dennis the Menace, will also recall that the Wilsons were the older couple who lived next door. In one particular cartoon, Dennis and his little friend Joey are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house, their hands full of cookies. Joey says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this?" And Dennis replies, "Look, Joey, Mrs Wilson gives us cookies not because *we're* nice, but because *she's* nice." Those words capture in essence the truth about God's grace. It isn't that we have earned it; it isn't because of what we do; grace is ours because of who God is – the One who loves us unconditionally.

Those familiar words from today's gospel speak about the amazing love and grace of God. But let's look at them in the context of the verses that surround them.

John 3:16 is first a word to Nicodemus. He was a member of the Pharisees – who in that day and time were influential religious leaders. They were very pious, held to the Law, and were ritually pure. It seems that Nicodemus, a man, a Pharisee, a leader used to privilege and entitlement needed to hear that God loves the world. He needed to understand that God's judgement is not like ours ... that in God's eyes all people have worth and value, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social status, and so on. And as we might say today, regardless of skin colour, race, religion, sexual orientation.

But this wasn't just a message for Nicodemus – it was for the disciples, too. For if we were to read on, in the very next chapter, Jesus takes the disciples to the world, to a small gentile town in Sychar, Samaria, so that they can meet *who* the world is. Because the world may very well be the last place -- and the last person -- on earth we think God would love.

We are reminded here once more that Jesus was always expanding the boundaries of God's circle of love and inclusion and challenging people to rethink their opinions about who is in and who is out. Jesus preached that God is fundamentally a God of love, and that love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs.

Paul tells the Ephesians: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he has loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together in Christ – by grace you have been saved." Grace like that is sometimes described as: "God's riches at Christ's expense." Love at great cost ... freely given. Love that is always seeking us out.

And Paul suggests this is not only what God is like, but this is what the church is meant to be like, too.

The church, as a vehicle of God's grace, is called to be about the business of seeking, reaching and finding those who are lost, those who are on the outside. In our gathering, we must be open to those who come seeking a place to belong, a community in which they feel welcomed and valued. In our mission, we are called to reach out, drawing people into the circle of Christ's love. We are called to break down barriers; to push boundaries, to draw the circle wide.

Some time ago, I spoke with someone who had been a former member of this congregation but had moved to a new location. He told me that he went to a United Church in his neighbourhood, a fairly large congregation. He went in the door and walked past the greeters and no one spoke to him. When the service was over, he walked out past an usher, and then the minister, who was busily engaged in conversation with one of the regular members, and still no one spoke to him. He had received no word of welcome, no recognition of his presence there, and he said to me, emphatically, "I'll never go back there again."

As members of this congregation, part of your ministry is to make people feel welcome here at this church. Think about having a visitor in your home ... would you just ignore that person, or would you sit them down, have a conversation, and maybe even a cup of tea? Well, this is your home, too. And from time to time there are visitors or newcomers needing to be welcomed. And it's not just in our face to face encounters on Sunday that make us welcoming or not, that help others to feel included and valued. It's in how we invite others to make use of our space; how visible we are as a church in the community; how we care for our neighbours; how our policies include or exclude; how committed we are to being accessible – from the clearing of our walkways, to the operation of our chair lift, to the openness we bring to our relationships with one another, and the willingness we have to engage respectfully with one another, despite our differing points of view. There are so many ways in which we are called to be those who extend the love and grace of Christ.

"Remember," Paul says, "one time you were separated, alienated, strangers to the covenant ... but now in Christ, you have been brought near by the blood of the cross. So you are no longer strangers or sojourners... for with his own body, Christ has broken down the walls that separated us."

Once you were outsiders, but now you belong. Once you were lost, but now you are found. Once you were a nobody, but now you are a somebody ... included in the circle of grace.

And that circle of grace in which God holds us and in which we also hold one another, is not a tight, restrictive circle, but one that expands, giving us room to be ourselves, to stretch and to grow. God's grace enables us to be all that God intends us to be. God's grace is amazing indeed.

Of course, there are always times when we would like to make the circle tight: to preserve tradition, to keep control, to make sure we all think and act and believe the same. But God calls us to draw the circle wide, wide enough so that each of us can explore and try our wings, be our own person, utilize our own particular gifts, even make our own mistakes. But always in the knowledge that we are governed by the love of Christ, and bound together in community which sustains us, holds us in love, and keeps us on the right track.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. It is this gift of God's self that becomes our greatest gift. By grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God. Thanks be to God!