

“God Loved the World”

*“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” (John 3:16).*

There is probably no better-known, more frequently quoted verse in the entire Bible than today’s text from John 3. This is one of the first verses many of us memorized and I’m sure that most, if not all of us, can recite it without hesitation. John 3:16 has been called “the Gospel in a nutshell” and, in our country today, this simple section of John’s Gospel has almost become a cultural cliché. It shows up on billboards, it boldly adorns t-shirts, and just last month, building on the witness of Tim Tebow who frequently sports the famous verse on his game day eye black, Focus on the Family actually ran a thirty-second ad in the Super Bowl that featured a group of children reciting John 3:16. It’s a heartwarming, feel-good ad that concludes with a beautiful, wide-eyed little girl staring into the camera and exclaiming, “Wow!”

With so many cultural connotations it can be difficult to reflect on such an iconic verse and consider the meaning of the text apart from all of the associations our society has attached to it. My hope for us today, is that we can do just that; that we can strip away all of our assumptions and consider what this powerful verse really means. And it all starts with these words, “God so loved the world.” There’s no question that this is a comforting and assuring thought, but as we ponder Jesus’ words in John 3:16, it’s important that we don’t miss the shocking nature of this phrase, because *we* don’t love the world.

I think I can say that there are parts of the world that I love. I love and I’m thankful for my wife and daughters every day. I’ve loved the cool, crisp, beautiful mornings we’ve had this past week. I enjoy reading a good book or navigating a bubbling river in a canoe. On Thursday, I got to visit the perfect, little newborn son of young couple in our church. These are great parts of life in this world. These are things I love.

But there’s another side to all of this that I don’t love or even like. I don’t like how my back hurts when I run. I don’t like the arguments and conflicts that sometimes ignite in my family. I hate traffic jams. I don’t like it when people are mean or selfish and yet these trivial things are nothing compared to the gut-wrenching realities of this sinful world. More often than any of us would like to admit, this broken world brings us to tears as we see senseless cruelty and unnecessary suffering, as we deal with unpunished crime and witness unspeakable abuse of power and people and as we are touched by the pain of loss and the bitterness of grief. And I’m sure that you would join me in saying that I don’t love this part of the world.

Now, I truly hope that you are having a great day and that as you are listening to me you are reflecting on some of the wonderful blessings that you treasure in this world and some loving people that God has brought into your life. But, I also know that today some of you are really struggling and *you don’t love the world*. You don’t love the loneliness you’re feeling. The health struggles that you’re going through may have left you depressed. Perhaps your marriage is falling apart and you don’t know what you’re going to do. Maybe an addiction is destroying you and the people you love or, for any number of other reasons, your life simply hasn’t turned out the way you thought it would and *you don’t love the world*. And when you are brought to this place of disquieting and uncomfortable honesty, the language of John 3:16 can work in a new and critically important way.

In today’s text Jesus told a man named Nicodemus, “God so loved the world.” Nicodemus was just like us. He didn’t love his world all that much. He was a religious leader who felt trapped in a helpless and desperate life and He didn’t know a way out. His friends weren’t helping and his good intentions and failed attempts at self-improvement had come up empty. So one night, under the cover of darkness, he snuck away to meet Jesus. Jesus was unlike anyone Nicodemus had ever met. He was doing miracles. He was teaching about a new life instead of the tired, old, false façade based on worldly status and the keeping up of appearances. His life was falling apart and Nicodemus needed something help, so he went to Jesus. And, to this man who was plagued by brokenness and sin Jesus said, “God so loved the world.”

So what do these words of Jesus that have come to saturate our cultural ethos really mean? And why does it matter? To answer these questions I’d like to tell you a story that I discovered this week about a man named Henry Gerecke. Henry Gerecke was a pastor in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod who died in 1961. During and after World War II, Pastor Gerecke served as an Army Chaplain in Europe and in his memoirs he wrote the following words: “Nearly 2,000 years ago, three crosses were erected at Golgotha. There in the midst of them hung Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. On either side were crucified two convicted criminals. One of them, in the last moments of his sinful life, repented and appealed for pardon, and was transported into paradise. The other died unsaved and passed into eternity. The cross is no longer there, but the value and the preciousness of Christ’s perfect work of redemption remain unchanged. Salvation in Christ is still the same for all souls as it was in that day. The attitude about the cross decides the eternal destiny. Faith in Jesus and His shed blood gives evidence of sins forgiven and God’s merciful hand saves from the place of eternal torment those whose faith is in Christ.”

These words may not seem all that remarkable, in fact you could probably make the case that in some sense these words are spoken in this church every week, but these reflections take on a new meaning when you understand the story of their author. You see, Pastor

Gerecke not only served as an Army chaplain who saw unspeakable suffering in the wake of World War II, but this LCMS Army chaplain was also selected as the chaplain to minister the war criminals who were tried at Nuremberg.

Chaplain Gerecke had gone to England 1944 and, for 14 months, he attended to the dying and wounded. After the War ended, Gerecke was part of Allied contingent that visited the Nazi death camps where he was a firsthand witness to the atrocities at Dachau. At age 52, Chaplain Gerecke had completed his duty and was hoping to go back to United States and rejoin his wife when, on July 15, 1945, he was summoned to Nuremberg, Germany where he was asked to serve as the chaplain to the most infamous of the surviving Nazi leaders awaiting trial for their horrific crimes. The Army had selected Gerecke for three reasons. First, like many Missouri Synod pastors of his generation, Gerecke spoke fluent German. He also had extensive experience in prison ministry prior to the war and, finally, he was a Lutheran and 15 of the 21 Nazis on trial identified themselves Lutherans, while the six remaining prisoners claimed to be "Roman Catholic." The Colonel who asked Gerecke to take on this unique task told him that this assignment was widely considered the most "unpopular in the entire Army" and although he was a committed and conscientious pastor, Chaplain Gerecke confessed that he had grave concerns about serving in this way. In his memoirs he wrote, "Must I greet these men who have brought such unspeakable suffering on the world and are the cause of the sacrifice of so many millions of lives? My two only sons were also victims of their misdeeds. How could I possibly bring myself before such men that they would be willing to receive God's word?"

In all honestly, most of the world would have said these men deserved no mercy, no consideration, no compassion, and certainly no chaplain of Christ to minister to them with the Word of God. To those who had lost homes, businesses or family members at the hands of the Nazis there was no punishment, no penalty, no pain that would have been too harsh for these monsters. These men were the masterminds of the Third Reich responsible for the abuse, torture and death of millions of people and, in fact, over 60 years later, many their names are still infamous. And yet, after great spiritual conflict and soul-searching, Henry Gerecke agreed to the assignment and began to serve these men who were by any human standard beyond saving.

"For God so loved the world." After meeting with the Nazi prisoners for the first time, Gerecke was forced to deal with these words in way that most of us can't begin to imagine and, as he struggled to reconcile the message of the Gospel with his own feelings of disgust and the reality of the evil with which he had come face to face, he later recalled: "I passed the night in prayer, asking God to give me a message for them. For these men must hear something of the Savior who suffered and died on the cross also for them."

Turning to Scripture, the chaplain began to preach the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. In the months that followed, the world heard words of public accusation and condemnation. Privately, Pastor Gerecke kept preaching and in brief worship services, Gerecke told these horrible men how Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, had sacrificed Himself for the salvation of sinners...*all sinners*. On October 1st, 1946, the verdicts at Nuremberg were handed down. For a few of the men there was acquittal; others were sentenced to prison. The worst of the Nazis leaders were condemned to die for their crimes against humanity. On October 16th, 1946, the world held its breath as those men mounted the steps of their gallows and many rejoiced as the guilty were hung. But Chaplain Gerecke saw something different. During the months of the trial the chaplain had seen the Holy Spirit acting in the lives of some of these men. In the shadow of death, having lost all things, including their lives, some of these criminals came to rely on the promises of God made to lost sinners, and confessed not only their terrible sins but also their faith in Christ and their reliance on the grace of God alone and, in their last days, they commended themselves to the mercy of God.

This is by no means a feel-good story. And I guarantee that this would never be featured in a Super Bowl commercial. It is an unsavory and ugly glimpse of the world and one that demonstrates the depth of our sin and the reality of justice...and yet, in the story of Henry Gerecke we hear the voice of Jesus speaking to Nicodemus in the night and we are challenged to consider what these words truly mean: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that *whoever* believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." The scandalous truth of the Gospel is that Jesus came to take on the sins of the world and His death on the cross is a death that pays for them all! I share this particular story with you today so you will know and believe that what St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians is true: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). And I share this story with you today so that will understand and believe the Lord when He says that, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." I tell you this story today so that you will know beyond any doubt that this promise of Jesus is for you! The cross is not pretty. The cross is not comfortable. But in the cross of Jesus our sin has been punished, we have the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life is ours.

You can actually listen to a recording of a lecture in which Chaplain Gerecke tells the story of his experiences at Nuremberg and in his closing remarks Gerecke makes an impassioned statement to his listeners. He says, "Remember friends, we've got a Gospel to give to the world that we should thank God for on our knees" (<http://www.stjohnchester.com/Gerecke/Gerecke.html>).

Henry Gerecke understood Jesus' words. They changed his heart and they gave him good news to share. And friends, Christ's words do the same for us. *"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"* (John 3:16). This is our Gospel to give to the world. Amen.

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