

# YEARNINGS

## Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life

### ***Love is a Many-Splendored and Messy Thing***

(Yearning for Love)

A prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
March 21-22, 2009 • Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

#### **Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

*O give thanks to God, for God is good; for God's steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of God say so, those whom God redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to God in their trouble, and God saved them from their distress; God sent out God's word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. Let them thank God for God's steadfast love, for God's wonderful works to humankind. And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of God's deeds with songs of joy.*

#### **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 judgment, 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."*

---

Our Lenten lectionary text for today could drive many a mainline minister to flee the pulpit in fear. And my guess is it has caused many "would be" Christians to flee the pews, too.

*"For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

This one verse is possibly the most memorized scripture from the bible. Almost daily one can find it on bumper stickers, billboards and t-shirts. If you watch football or baseball on TV you almost always see someone in the crowd, usually in the end zone or in deep center field, waving a sign with JOHN 3:16 printed in large letters. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that this one single verse has been printed on practically every surface that is printable.

If as a child you grew up in a Southern Baptist church like me, then you may have even had an *experience* with John 3:16. Allow me to paint the scene: a Sunday school classroom. Half a dozen children sitting on chairs around a table. A grown-up sitting with them on a chair much too small passing out all the ingredients for the day's object lesson: walnuts, nutcrackers, colored pencils, slips of paper the size of those you find in fortune cookies, and of course, glue, lots of glue.

The nuts must be carefully cracked so that they open right along the little seam. Each child needs to have two complete half shells that fit perfectly together. The children take the nuts out of the shells and put them in a bowl in the middle of the table. On a slip of paper each child copies down exactly what the grown-up says: Capital "J," lowercase "o," "h," "n," the number "3," a colon, and then the number "16." John 3:16.

Then comes the tricky part: putting glue along the edge of the shell halves, not too much, not too little, placing the slip of paper half inside the shell, half out, with its message showing, and finally pressing the two shell halves together. The children now hold their shells while the glue dries, and the grown-up opens the Bible to John 3:16, shows the children the passage, and reads:

*“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

“This is the gospel in a nutshell,” the teacher says. If you want to say in a few words how God loves us, or if you need to remind yourself of God’s love for you, you can always repeat these words. The teacher continues, “This is a very good verse to know by heart because it’s the very best part of God’s story.”

My friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Nancy Petty, Co-Pastor at the Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, tells this story, and adds:

I shall never forget the one brave soul around that table that dared to express his own commentary on the lesson. His name was Mark. Mark looked down at the heaping pile of nuts in the center of the table, then at his sticky walnut shell, then up at the teacher. “How can this be the very best part?” he asks, waving his empty, gluey shell with its little tag sticking out. “We’ve taken out the part you can eat!”

There is always a skeptic in the crowd to keep everyone honest!

The gospel in a nutshell: that’s what Martin Luther called John 3:16 and it made a great 3rd grade Sunday School lesson until one child had the courage to flag that something just didn’t seem right about what was supposed to be “the very best part of God’s story.”

Well, like Mark in that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Sunday School class, I’m also not sure that this one verse is our best sampling of “the very best part of God’s story.” Now, before any of you decide to crucify me, or run me out of the church and out of town on charges of heresy, let me try to offer a brief explanation. This will be a quick and dirty Bible lesson, so hold on!

First, for many Christians this one verse *does* summarize the essence of the gospel: God’s love for the world, the centrality of Jesus, eternal life, and the decisiveness of faith. But more than likely, this passage simply epitomizes several of the most important themes of John’s telling of the good news of Jesus, not necessarily Jesus’ gospel. And even though these words may be printed in red in some of your Bibles, indicating that the words were spoken by Jesus, the truth is that it is not always easy to distinguish the voice of Jesus from the voice of the John and/or the early church. So to say that these words are a “nutshell” summary of Jesus’ gospel is not quite accurate. It just seems to me that they are more a summary of John’s particular gospel, which scholars tend to refer to as “the gospel of the early church” as they experienced Jesus after his death and resurrection.

When I grew up, we were taught that John’s gospel was the beginner’s Gospel. If you only one gospel to read, read John! We even passed out copies of John’s gospel in all of our evangelistic efforts. But today, I would say the better gospel to begin with is Mark, which is the first and oldest gospel, or Luke, which has a lot of wonderful stories. But I definitely wouldn’t say John. Out of our four gospels, John is so different. It is definitely *advanced* reading that requires a more nuanced and sophisticated reading. Read Mark, Matthew and Luke and do your best to make sense of Jesus and the gospel he proclaimed. When you think you have a pretty good “sense” then you can move on to John. John is definitely graduate level Christian reading. John’s gospel is more theological and spiritual in nature, and should be heard and read as such.

Matthew, Mark and Luke, tend to give us a more earthy, human accounting of Jesus life and teachings. No where do they have Jesus claiming any sort of divinity for himself. That is only in John’s gospel. So while John’s gospel is a treasure of the Church, it is not a necessarily our best summary of Jesus’ life and teaching about God, nor our best summary of Jesus’ gospel...his good news.

Second, the expression “eternal life” is used 17 times in John’s gospel and only sparingly in all of the other gospels. The problem is, of course, that many Christians automatically think that “eternal life” refers to a place called heaven...that place some folks get to go to after they die if they are really, really good and are washed in the blood of Jesus. While the expression naturally connotes life without end...

everlasting life...it properly implies not only a quantitative but also a qualitative aspect. Thus "eternal life" is the life characterized by the blessedness of the age to come, life which *already* participates in its glorious future. So, "eternal life" is not just about a future time and place. It is about a future that impinges on and is experienced in the present. It is what the great theologian, Paul Tillich, called "The Eternal Now." And in John's gospel it is rightly noted that the expression "eternal life" is used in a manner parallel to the ways in which the other gospel writers refer to the "kingdom of God" as descriptive of another reality and a future hope that can be, and is already, experienced in the present.

Third, there is that word "only." Some of course see this as justification for the claim to Christian exclusivity. In other words, Jesus is the only way to God and to salvation. Jesus is the only way to get to heaven. However, to make this claim is an over-translation. The term "only Son" simply stresses the uniqueness of Jesus in relation to God, thus further emphasizing the costliness of the giving as the supreme expression of God's love.

Fourth, on the human side, the love of God is to be met with deep trust, or faith, or by "believing," especially in Jesus. This, too, is one of those central themes in John's gospel account. The verb "to believe" is used 98 times in John. It is regrettable that our English verb "to believe" connotes the limited notions of cognitive assent or confessional affirmation. Believing in this context, however, implies personal trust and fidelity in Jesus. And it is the only word we've got. We don't have a verb for "faithing!" But is this belief in Jesus a transaction that purchases your fire insurance, so that you don't have to go to hell when you die, and allows you to go to heaven instead? Or is this believing in Jesus an act of faith and confession that says we trust that Jesus got it right about God? I want to suggest that as Christians we are drawn to Jesus and believe in him because we trust and find meaning and hope in the God to which Jesus points us! This is not a call "to do" something that will purchase our fire insurance so that we can go to heaven when we die and stay out of hell.

Fifth, and finally, there is that word "to perish." Without thinking, many Christians think this is a code word for "hell" – a place of eternal punishment and perishing...fire and brimstone...and hot...very, very HOT! It is not! By the way, it is impossible to construct a helpful and consistent theology of hell out of our sacred texts, the Bible. Give it a try if you like, but you just can't do it. When it comes to this notion of "hell," what we have is a fear-driven dogma, not based in the life and teachings of Jesus the Jew at all, but a dogma created by the Church many years after his death and resurrection. And this notion of hell has inflicted havoc and been a distraction to the church ever since. John 3:16's claim is simple: God's loving purpose in sending Jesus was not to effect condemnation on human beings. Did you hear that? It was "NOT to condemn!" Instead, God's loving purpose is "to save." Not to save from hell fire, but to save, as in to deliver or to set free, as in to offer refuge. Nevertheless, I want to affirm that to reject the generous love of God is to perish! For in rejecting the generosity of God, people effect a fate for themselves, and for the world, that contradicts God's gracious intentions.

Whew! I have said a lot in a short amount of time. Maybe I've said too much. But I hope it was somewhat helpful. Our familiarity with this verse, and the lens by which we have been programmed to see it, hasn't always been real helpful or real reliable. So let me summarize why I tend to want to avoid this text. Let me offer a paraphrase of John 3:16 that highlights my hesitation:

God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son from heaven to earth, so that anyone who believes in him, and only him (Too bad if you are Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or never get to hear about Jesus!), by inviting him into his or her heart, and by confessing sins, and praying the sinners prayer, will not have to perish in hell forever and ever, but will be able to live with God in heaven when they die.

Yuck! I avoid this text precisely because it so wrapped up in *that* particular and narrow and fear-based theological perspective. And I know from personal experience, to even attempt to cut through that heavy theological crust is never easy; and one does so at one's own peril. Nevertheless, it is *that* particular theological perspective that drives some Christians to be so insistent on using John 3:16 as their "Gospel in a nutshell."

Now let me offer a paraphrase of how I read this text. I think it is more consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus and the whole testimony of the human experience of God in both the Old and New Testament:

God is love, and God's love is steadfast and sure and reaches out to the whole world, and not just some people but all people and the whole earth, and we've experienced this love of God decisively in the life and teachings of Jesus, and we trust this love of God to lead us in the ways

of liberation and justice; to lead us in the way of life, not death, which is ours to claim not just in the future, but right here, right now, in a hopeful present.

I know, it's wordy, but I hope it gives you another way of entering this text that is grounded in a God of unconditional love and acceptance, what we Christians have named as "grace," and not a God of reward and punishment and non-grace. Hear it clearly: God so *loved* the world.

But what is this love? Rabbi Kula, in his book *YEARNINGS; EMBRACING THE SACRED MESSINESS OF LIFE*, says that our faith story and the essence of what it means to be a human being "all begins with the yearning for love...love is the fundamental human longing." And the yearning for love begins with these words: "It is not good to be alone." The first song we sang as we gathered for worship got it right and said it beautifully: "We whose Spirits long to share, long to comfort and to heal, know that when we act alone, hope is difficult to feel." Love begins with the words: "It is not good to be alone." And whatever we say about love, it is rooted in God's love...in God's intention...in the God who we name and know best as love.

But what does this love look like? What does this love feel like? Rabbi Kula spends three long chapters describing what this love is all about. He says love is *covenant*. Covenant is a fancy word for agreement...It's a container for loving in all its variations. It holds the promise that the highs and lows, the brokenness and healing will all be on the inside of the relationship and that there'll be enough pleasure and celebration to hold it all together.

Covenant is the place of intimacy. Covenant is the place of security and safety where experience and embrace the fullness of life with all of its vicissitudes. It is the promise of companionship and presence all along the journey.

Love is the balancing the *giving and receiving*. Kula says, Love will always upset the balance. The energy and dynamism of love doesn't allow for anything but very temporary resting places, calms before the next storm. Just when the roles seems clear and defined – the giving and receiving going smoothly without a hitch – something will upset things and throw everything into play once again....Purity of love is not about being perfectly reciprocal. It's about how honest people are to each other as to how they are giving and receiving.

Love is a constant balancing act. It is a willingness to negotiate and then re-negotiate the giving and receiving of love...of what is needed to offer our relationships life and healing.

Love is *forgiving*. Kula says

Our most loving relationships are those in which we say "sorry" continuously. Forgiveness is central to the workings of love. If we're not seeking and receiving, being asked for and granting forgiveness on a regular basis, it's most likely that our relationship is not as intimate, dynamic, or alive as we think it is. And it's likely that we're holding in plenty of bitterness, resentment, guilt and shame. Quite simply, things aren't messy enough. One could say that forgiveness is the glue of loving relationships, holding them all together and constantly renewing and repairing them. But there is no such thing as "an act" of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process, a way of being the world.

Love is willing to forgive and forgive again, and again, and again. It is a willingness to help release the burdensome baggage of the past.

There is a lot of gold to mine in Rabbi Kula's words. I commend his words to you. For sure, love is a many-splendored *and messy* thing. Those of us who yearn for love in our relationships, in our families, in our church, in our wider community, will find ourselves thrust into the wonder and messiness of life, into its joys and sorrows, its ups and downs, its good and bad, its beauty and ugliness. And yet, this is the very world that God loves. This is the very world that God passionately chooses to love. It is a risky, vulnerable kind of love. It is the kind of love that yearns for life and liberation; that yearns for healing and reconciliation; that yearns for truth and renewal. It is a love that endures. It is a love that is steadfast, steady and sure.

The quirky but poignant writer, Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some thoughts on Faith*, writes that the poet

Auden was right when he wrote, "I know nothing, except what everyone knows – if there when Grace dances, I should dance"...

I understand that Auden meant grace in the theological sense, meant if as the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love – the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.

(Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, pages 138-139)

Both Rabbi Kula and Sister Lamott are naming the kind of love I yearn for. In my partnership with Dan, I yearn for that kind love to be experienced between us. In our parenting of Gideon and Aydan, I yearn for that kind love to be ever present in our home. In my friendships and in this community of faith I yearn for that kind of love to be the hallmark and gift of life together. And my hunch is that you are yearning for that kind of love too. And as a Christian...as one who follows in the way of Jesus... I yearn for a Church that is dedicated to a way of life in which openness, respect, and an unfettered search for truth is the mark of an aroused and purified Christianity and known once again *by its love!* BY ITS LOVE!

O give thanks to God, for God is good, for God's steadfast love endures forever!

Amen.