Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 12:1-4a
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17
Psalm 121

Last October, at the annual convention of the Episcopal Church in Colorado, The Rev. Dr. Patricia Lyons delivered our keynote presentations. She said something I have pondered ever since. “At the moment of death, resurrection happens, whether we agree to it or not.”

There have been so many times when I have wanted to quote the Rev. Lyons to my hospice patients and their families, when someone is concerned that their loved one is not “saved,” for one reason or another. I want to say, “please, with all you are dealing with at this time, please, be confident of one thing. God loves you, formed you in God’s own image, and will bring you back home again when you die.” I can say those words with great confidence, and commitment. But those are my beliefs, and there are a great many Christians who have a much different belief about how this all works, who disagree adamantly with me, and insist that one must meet a certain standard to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In our gospel reading today, we find one of the sources of that belief, but also a counter argument. John 3:16, the most quoted verse in the Bible. Sometimes called “Christianity in a nutshell.” “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

It breaks my heart when I see a tearful son preaching to his dying parent, “just say you love Jesus dad. You must say it!” Or when friends walk into the room of a very anxious dying patient and say, “we keep telling him that if he’ll just accept Jesus this will be just fine.” Or the dying mother who is distraught because she fears she will never see her gay son in heaven. Another hospice chaplain once told me she would much rather work with an avowed atheist than a Christian who has been convinced that God is selective about who God loves and will care for. I feel the same way.

You see, friends, there is no negotiating with God for the blessing of God’s love. It’s just ours. How we reach out and latch on to that gift is what differentiates us. But the presence of God’s love for all of creation is non-negotiable.

We baptize in the Christian church as a visible sign of something that has already occurred. Our baptismal rite makes a public declaration of the fact that we are God’s own and are bound to God for eternity. It’s an important act of recognizing that fact and of community commitment to nurture and educate the baptized in their life in Christ. But perhaps we should add some words to the rite. “You are marked as Christ’s own forever, whether you agree to it or not.” The same could be done with the absolution after our general confession. “Almighty God, have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins, whether you agree to it or not!”
None of this is negotiable. God’s love is unconditional. God gave Jesus to the world to show us how to live in the embrace of that love. That’s it. There is no influencing God’s desire, ability, or absolute power to love us. And that’s true from the beginning, it’s not something we can, or need, to earn along the way.

So, let’s get back to John 3:16. That verse says that God gave God’s son to us, despite the inevitability of his suffering and death, because “God so loved the world.” The “so” in that sentence is not a reference to the quantity of God’s love. It refers to the quality of God’s love. It’s intense, all pervasive, and ever present. But too often we, as Christians, act like it’s our special privilege. And there has been endless heartbreak and violence and domination and degradation because of it.

“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.” This line has two words which are the root of the problem, “world,” and “believe.”

The Greek word, translated as “world,” is kosmos. It’s used again in verse 17. “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Here it’s important to look at how the writer of this gospel uses that word kosmos in other places, because in John, it refers to an entity which is hostile to God. Here is how Jesus uses it. John 15:18, 19

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.

John 16:33 “In the world you face persecution.”
John 17:9 “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”

Given that, one could re-write John 3:16-17 like this. “God so loved the God-hating world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn this world, which despised God, but so that, through him, this anti-God world might be saved.”

So, if I’ve got this right, scripture tells us that God loves not just those who return that love, but also the enemies of God and those who don’t care about God, and even those who say God does not exist. And Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and to forgive 70 X 7. Can it possibly be that humans are expected to pour out more love and forgiveness than God? Of course not!

Now let’s look at the word “believe,” as in “those who believe in him.” Again, looking at the original Greek can broaden our perspective of what that word means in this passage. Pistévo can translate as “to believe.” But it also means to trust, to have faith. And today’s scriptures are
full of references to those who are called to trust in God. Abram was called to trust God and to uproot from his homeland and go to some undefined place God would show him. The psalmist points to God as the source of help and protection. And in Romans, Paul is emphasizing that it is trust which puts us in right relationship with God, not words or deeds. But we have construed all of this to mean that all this requires that we worship Jesus. Richard Rohr has said pointed out that Jesus never said: “Worship me.” And Rohr explains: “Worship of Jesus is rather harmless and risk-free; following Jesus changes everything.”

With our singular motivation being our gratitude for this boundless and unconditional love, there is much to do! Having received this complete and unconditional love, we must share it with the world. But not by sorting through we think is “in” and who is “out,” and trying to persuade them that they’re wrong. I’m talking about walking the way of love, as messengers, not managers. Bishop Curry says it this way, "Being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously, letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives, and in so doing helping to change the world from our nightmare into God’s dream.”

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1 https://episcopalchurch.org/