

John 3:16

Dear Friends in Christ,

As I thought about the sermon this morning, I was drawn to these familiar words of a man named Norman Schouten (I believe a reformed pastor from some years back):

We must realize that the symbol of Christianity is not a beautifully polished cross, but a lopsided, crude, splintery cross over which is draped a towel - not the lush plush kind of towel we buy for our guest bathroom, but a dirty old rag, wet with the sweat and dirt of men's feet.

Yet, even with that and many other images, it's difficult to capture the depth of God's love. So many things to consider. Heaven poured into our lives. God's Presence. So many promises to see us through this world.

This Sunday of Advent we'll try to get in touch once again. It's our return to John 3:16. This Sunday of Advent . . .

## **HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON**

### **I. What We Gave.**

Have you ever really considered what we gave to God that would cause Him to love us so much? I mean, that's the way it works, right? I do something for someone and then comes the payback.... somewhere down the line. So, have you ever really considered what we gave to God that would cause Him to love us so much?

Well, let's see, the Holy Spirit reveals this: "(We) were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." (Eph. 2:3) That's the way it was and is for them and us. *By nature children of wrath.*

And then come some of the most taken for granted words for those who know the Word: "While we were sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8) And on the heels of that truth is this one from the Holy Spirit: "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." (Rom 5:10) *We were enemies.*

And here's another Scripture that most don't want to hear - or try to write off as nonsense: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Or as we might say: I don't know of any parent who had to teach their child to be "bad". Do you? *I was brought forth in iniquity.*

So, here's what we gave to God: Wrath and sin and, consequently, our status as enemies before Him. And the part that really zings the heart is what Paul says of himself:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. (Rom. 7:18-19)

Well, if Paul says that of himself as an Apostle, could we say less about ourselves? Sin and evil. And, if that isn't enough, Jesus says of every human: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (Matt. 15:19) Can you recall some of the evil that has come from your heart? The thoughts? Hatred? Lust? Slander?

It's not a good picture, is it? And a look at America's direction this morning most definitely underscores everything that has been stated. So, once again, the question: Have you ever considered what we gave to God that would cause Him to love us so much? And the answer? Nothing. Not one thing.

## II. What He Gave.

But look at what He gave us. ***His only Son.*** *He gave.* Do you remember where it began? In the Garden. After that moment when we're told of Adam and Eve, "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked." (Gen. 3:7) And then the appalling ignorance, distrust and fear of God that fell upon them: "...and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden." (Gen. 3:8b) Really? Who can hide from God? Why would man fear and distrust the One Who made all things and gives all things? Appalling ignorance of God! It's where sin takes every human.

And there, at that moment in time, the first promise of the coming Savior as spelled out in those words of God to Satan: "...He (the Christ) shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15b) Thus, Paul writes, "Therefore, as one trespass (Adam's sin) led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness (Christ's perfect obedience on our behalf) leads to justification and life for all men."

Remember the Sermon Hymn, *Rock of Ages*? And what was it we sang? "Naked come to Thee for dress; Helpless, look to Thee for grace." And Jesus calls out,

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

That we have received. Rest for our souls. Rest from the fear of sin and death and hell. Rest from the guilt that often plagues our lives. Forgiveness of every sin. And He dressed us. Clothed us in the perfect life of Christ. The Lord impresses upon us from Scripture, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3:27) Sees us as His forgiven children.

And we sang: "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling." Nothing to give. Nothing. Our empty hands can only grasp and hold on to the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the promise is always ours - from Scripture: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1) Through Christ, God looks at us - each of us - one at a time - and the sentence is pronounced: "Not guilty!" "Not guilty!" "Not guilty." He gave!

## III. What He Still Gives.

And He still gives! In Luther's Small Catechism, under question 161, are these words: "The Gospel is the means by which the Holy Spirit offers us all the blessings of Christ and creates faith in us." (Luther's Small Catechism, English Standard Version, CPH, 2005, p. 152) Immediately following that is this: "Note: The written and spoken Word of the Gospel and the sacraments are the means of grace."

The written and spoken Word of the Gospel along with the Word made visible - the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper - are the means whereby God comes to us, speaks to us, communicates His love and forgiveness of all sin, informs us that we are His now and forever through the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Do you see? We call the first part of our Worship the Service of the Word. It's all the Word - from the Invocation to the Gospel. Why would anyone want to replace the means God has chosen to speak to us with things that can only excite the flesh - for a moment? Why would anyone not follow the Scriptures and read with us on a Sunday morning?

Do you see? We call the second part of our Worship the Service of the Sacrament. It's all the Word. The visible Word. The miracle of Christ feeding us His body and blood for forgiveness and eternal life. It's Christ coming to where we are and giving us the Gospel in the way that we can see, smell, taste, touch and hear.

Do you see? On those occasions when there's a Baptism, we once again recall our Baptisms, as we should daily; when the Holy Spirit entered our lives, cleansed us from sin, buried us with Christ in His death and raised us to newness of life. Clothed us in the perfect life of Jesus. As stated in Luther's Catechism: "Christ has indeed won full forgiveness and salvation for the whole human race with His perfect life, suffering, death, and resurrection. He distributes this same forgiveness in Baptism. (Baptism is a means of grace)." (Question 249, p. 210)

Do you see? He gives and gives. And we receive. And the world? It gives and gives. Uncertainty. Fear. Failed promises. Disappointment. Tragedy. Churning stomachs and the occasional headache. Okay...some "good times." Some. And - well - finally - a grave.

It's one or the other. Nothing in my hand I take. Simply to the grave I quake. Or..."Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to the Cross I cling."

*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...* He gave and gives. We receive and live - forever.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

*December 7, 2014*

*John 3:16:*    ***“He Gave His Only Son”***

*I. What We Gave.*

*II. What He Gave.*

*III. What He Still Gives.*

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