

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

Today in our Gospel reading we have, next to the 23rd Psalm, the most famous verse in all of Scripture. We see it on billboards, on t-shirts, on keychains, on pencils, on coffee mugs. We have heard it in speeches given by more than one President. We've heard it quoted and misquoted. And unlike much of the Bible, this verse is known by believers and non-believers alike. It's everywhere. But sometimes when we hear a verse so often we tend to think we know everything there is to know about it and we don't give it the prayer or attention that it deserves.

So that being said, I'd invite you to take a moment, take a deep breath, close your eyes and let this passage wash over you as you hear what Martin Luther called "the gospel in miniature." Ready? Here we go. A reading from 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." I'll read it one more time. "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."

Now that you have heard God's promise with new listening ears, what comes to your mind? What word or phrase jumps out at you? If you answered the word love. I'm with you. When I read this verse or hear someone recite it, I hear the word love. It's where my attention usually goes. I can't help but think about what love means for me and to me. Sometimes, I even hear the song by the Beatles, "all you need is love" playing in my head while I'm reading this verse. In fact, I'm fairly certain I sang that in a sermon once. All joking aside though, as I think harder about the word love, I try to imagine a love that is even bigger and better than any love I have ever experienced in my lifetime, and I know that love, the love that is unimaginable is God's love for me and for all creation.

When this text comes about in the lectionary nine times out of ten that's what my sermon will be focused on. In fact, I found 3 of them while I was preparing for this sermon! But when I was studying and praying over this lesson for today, expecting to be writing a sermon on love and the sacrificial nature of God's love, something new happened, the word love isn't what stuck in my mind and heart, it was the word "believe" that caught my eye.

If you hear the word "believe" in the context of our text for this morning and focus on just that, it's easy for us to wonder if we have enough belief. Over the course of my ministry while I was in hospital waiting rooms, praying over people before surgery, holding the hands of people who were transitioning from this life into the next, doing marriage counseling, listening to stories of heart break and brokenness, more often than not the question I often get asked is, "Pastor, why is this happening? Did I not pray hard enough? Was my faith not strong enough? Did I do something to make God upset and so he didn't hear or listen to me and my prayers?"

Their questions break my heart. They make me grieve for a world who does not recognize the God that I know and love, a world that places a quantitative value on our beliefs. When we focus on the quantitative nature of our belief, we tend to ask the question "Do you believe that Jesus died for you?" If the answer is yes, then sweet you are in. But if the answer is no, then you're out of luck and voted off the island. Don't get me wrong. What we believe does matter. It does matter that we have faith. But sometimes when this is our focus, how much we believe in God or even if we believe at all, our focus gets skewed. Remember, all you need is faith as small as a mustard seed, right?

You see at the root of it all this text is about God's absolute and infinite love for the world, even to the point of his own loss. But rather than focus on the radical nature of God's love we tend to focus on how separate or how far away God is from us. We see a God who is distant

from his creation, a God who could care less about all the of pain, suffering, injustice, cruelty, and sinfulness we see at work in the world around us...and boy is there a lot! It seems like the people who beg, cheat, steal and lie are the ones who often win and the most vulnerable pay the price. We cry out to God in despair and we ask, beg and plead for God to help, but nothing changes; the cancer is still there, our loved one still died, our financial situations are still bad. From our view out the window in the tree stand, darkness seems to be all around us. In fact, darkness seems to be winning. So instead of trusting God, we take care of the judgment piece. We say it's because we don't have enough faith or belief that darkness wins. It's because they don't believe enough or pray hard enough that their situations don't change. We don't look to God. Instead we focus on the darkness that is all around us. And that darkness can become overwhelming.

But the cross part, the second piece to this verse answers the question, "Where is God in all of this?" Jesus makes it clear that the cross is the place where we can find God active among his creation, his beloved children. And on that cross, Jesus is the light shining in the darkness, even if it appears from our tree stand that the darkness is winning. The cross is lifted up to remind us that God is here in the world working, in our suffering, in our sense of abandonment, in our pain and even in our death. The very next verse tells us Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, but to suffer and die to save the world. That sign of death becomes a sign of life. Easter comes sooner than we might think.

The cross comes to us as a sign of hope. It gives us something to believe in. The cross was not meant to single people out that don't belong, but instead it embraces the world with a love which is radical, generous, intimate and bright. The cross reveals a God who meets us in our lack of belief, in our despair, in our suffering when it feels like darkness will finally have the last

word and overtake us. In the cross Jesus offers us an eternal self-giving love in a deep and personal way that leads to new life, both glimpses of it in this life as well as new life for all of eternity.

You see we have an eternal God, a God who's light never goes out, not even in the face of darkness. And as Jesus' followers God asks us to trust in that promise, that his light and his love will always have the last and final word. And then because we believe that, go out and live out God's love right now on this earth for all to see, naming Jesus as our Lord and savior. We are that testimony of love. We are that witness of light and hope. We are God's hands in the world. So maybe it is true, all you really do need is love. Jesus love. Come to the table today and be filled, filled with God's love and forgiveness. Thanks be to God. Amen.