

Text: John 3:14-21  
Date: Sunday, March 26, 2006- Lent 4  
Zion Lutheran Church- North Battleford, SK.  
Preacher: Rev. Sheldon Gattinger  
sheldon.gattinger@gmail.com

Grace and Peace be unto you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

I can imagine that most people here have been to a large sports gathering of some kind. And if you have not been to one, you have most likely seen one on television. I am sure that none of us are strangers to big sporting events like The Stanley Cup play-offs, the Grey Cup, or The Super Bowl.

Now, at these large events, if you look around the rink or the stadium you undoubtedly see people holding up large signs and banners. Why exactly people do this I am not entirely sure- maybe they like the attention, maybe they want to support their team, maybe they want to see themselves on television. Whatever the reasons are behind this phenomena, people like to bring signs and proudly display them.

This morning, I have brought two signs that I often see at these events on T.V. as the camera pans over the crowd. The first sign that I have here is most likely familiar to everyone. (Hold up the "HI MOM- I'M ON TV" sign) Isn't nice when a son or daughter pays tribute to their loving mother on national television in front of millions of people?

The second sign that I have here is hopefully familiar to everyone who has ever watched a sporting event on television (hold the "JOHN 3:16" sign)... Oh yes, the old and famous "John 3:16" sign. In fact, I would be as bold to say, that after the 23rd Psalm, the 16th verse of the 3rd chapter of St. John's gospel is the most memorized portion of Scripture in the world.

Now once again, what motivates someone to decorate a large sign and lug it all the way to a hockey rink or a football stadium- I don't know for sure. However, their reason for doing so is obvious: grassroots evangelism. When some fan heaves his "JOHN 3:16" above his head during a stoppage of play, he is hoping that this little and powerful piece of gospel will speak to someone. In many ways this fan is attempting to give his testimony to the world- or at least those who are sports fans!

So what is this piece of Scripture that finds its way into hockey rinks, soccer pitches, and football fields? Well here it is: 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.

It would appear to be kind of self-explanatory, would it not? Simply put, God loves us so much that his Son- Jesus Christ- underwent suffering and death so that we might experience God's heavenly kingdom. As mentioned earlier, this is a powerful piece of Scripture which (in many ways) gives us a thumbnail sketch of God's love and his gospel message. It is no wonder that this simple verse adorns so many signs. Whether or not this form of "evangelism" works, is another story...

Now, you may have noticed that I have one more sign left up here with me this morning. Now I am not trying to take anything away from those who choose to carry "JOHN 3:16" signs or that powerful piece of Scripture itself. Heaven forbid...

However, I have made myself my own sign. Now just where I am going to take it...I am not sure. But I have made it and it is ready to go if the Spirit moves me to do so. So, without further delay, here is my sign (hold up "JOHN 3:17" sign). What do you think?

Now I know it might not be as historically catchy as John 3:16, but I think (I hope?) that I am on solid footing. Now, as my sign indicates, I have decided to propagate John 3:17. Now let's once again hear this important little piece of Scripture: Indeed God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It is in this verse that we see what makes Christ so special and unique. For in Christ, we do not see simply a wise man, a "spiritual" man, or even a prophet- but in Christ we find a savior. As St. John says to us in today's gospel reading we find someone who can redeem us and offer us eternal life.

This is why we call our God loving and merciful. He doesn't just command things of us, God doesn't just point out our sinfulness- but rather God does something about it! He forgives us, redeems us, and ultimately he saves us.

But for this gospel pronouncement to have meaning, we have to admit that we need saving. We must acknowledge to ourselves and to God that we are in fact sinful and that we do need God's forgiveness and salvation. In other words, try as hard as we might, we cannot save ourselves from ourselves. Only God can do that.

The truth is...we are sinners and estranged from God. This would seem to be of dubious worth. There is no value to being a sinner, but there is value in knowing that one is a sinner. Were it not for this knowledge, we would have no need for Jesus and the rest of the New Testament.

In the Peanuts comic strip Lucy once said to Charlie Brown, "Discouraged again, eh, Charlie Brown?" You know what your whole trouble is? The whole trouble with you is that you're you!" Charlie asks, "Well, what in the world can I do about that?" Lucy answers, "I don't pretend to be able to give advice ... I merely point out the trouble!"

The next day Lucy speaks again, "You know what the whole trouble with you is, Charlie Brown?" Charlie answers, "No, and I don't want to know! Leave me alone!" He walks away. Lucy shouts after him, "The whole trouble with you is you won't listen to what the whole trouble with you is!"

Today's culture doesn't appear to want to hear a message that says humanity is "in bondage to sin." We don't like being told that we are not perfect. In fact, we sometimes despise it. But make no mistake about it we are in bondage to sin. We have a "sin" problem.

Whenever our problem of "sin" is defined as doing something bad, the solution is simply to stop doing that bad thing -- or start doing good things. Salvation becomes nothing more than doing good things and avoiding the bad. Such a solution doesn't need Jesus -- or Jesus simply becomes a model of doing the right things. This watered-down, cheap salvation comes about when we don't see that we are the problem. The problem is not the things we do; the problem is who we are-- sinful human beings.

But thankfully God has come for people just like me and you. For those of us who live in bondage to sin, for those of us who struggle to know God's will for our lives and our world, Christ himself says: Indeed God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

I am saved- you are saved- not because I've earned it or you've earned it- but we are all saved because God loves us. And for that, I say "Thanks be to God!"

So yeah, I am going to carry my sign around with glee in my heart as I try and remind people what an awesome God we have.

Amen