

# THE PROBLEM WITH LOVE

Pastor Steven Molin

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Lent 4  
John 3:14-21

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This is the story of a young dad who was having fits with his three-year-old son at bedtime. Any of you out there have three-year-old children or grandchildren? They can be hideous, right? Three is the new terrible two; “threenagers” I have heard them called! So this young dad was tucking in his three year old, but the little guy refused go to bed, refused to stay in his bed, refused to listen to the story his dad was reading to him, and eventually resorted to a heartbreaking outburst. “I hate you daddy! I don’t love you, I hate you!” But this young dad, bless his heart, had the presence of mind to respond to his young son with these words; “Benjamin, you might hate me, but I love you, whether you like it or not!”

I doubt that Benjamin will remember those words he said to his dad beyond the next morning. But he might remember his dad’s response; **“I love you whether you like it or not.”** When he argues with his dad about curfew in high school, or a minor-in-possession violation when he’s in college, or when he loses his first job and has to move back home. Whether he liked it or not, his dad was always there, always loving, always forgiving, always letting his actions of love speak louder than his words of love.

But I have also known people who cannot easily accept love. It’s too great a burden to carry. They would rather be punished for their offense, so that the ledger is equal. If they can just be spanked, or grounded, or serve their time, or pay the fine, then they don’t have to feel indebted to the one whose love obliterates their sin.

And that’s the kind of love we find in our gospel lesson for today. ***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.***

John 3:16 may be the favorite bible verse for almost everyone in this sanctuary this morning. It might be the first verse we ever learned, the only verse we ever memorized in Sunday School, and if you go home today and check, it might be the only verse you ever underlined, or circled, or highlighted.

Why are those words of Jesus so powerful? Why did Martin Luther say that this verse is “the gospel in miniature”? (*Pause*) Because the word “IF” never appears in it. Jesus never qualifies his love; he does not say,

*If you stop sinning, I will love you  
If you never doubt me, I will love you  
If you are never angry with me, Benjamin, I will love you*

All Jesus says is, “I love you. Whether you like it or not, I love you.”

But there is a problem with love so unconditional as that. The problem is that God’s love is hard to escape, even if we want to. It is important to know that the word that Jesus uses in this verse for **world** (for God so loved the world) the word Jesus uses is *kosmos*. It’s Greek. It literally means “those who are against me.” The word *Kosmos* means, those who hate me, those who stand in opposition to me, those who see me as their enemy. In the gospel of John, every time Jesus uses the word world, he uses *kosmos*. Every time. So let me paraphrase our favorite verse; *For God so loved those who hated him that he gave his only son...to die on the cross for them...* I love you. Whether you like it or not, I love you.

And that’s a problem for us. We get angry with God. We lash out when things don’t go our way. We rebel, we ignore God sometimes, we chose to turn our backs on him, and we wish that he would leave our consciences alone. But all the while, there is this promise; *For God so loved those who hated him that he gave his only son...to die on the cross for them...* Whether you like it or not, I love you. And we cannot escape a love so great as that.

Anyone who has ever read the book or seen the play of Victor Hugo, “*Les Miserables*” will immediately recognize this story. Jean Valjean was a paroled prisoner who, because of his incarceration, could not find work. He found refuge one evening when a Roman Catholic bishop welcomed him into his home to spend the night. Early the next morning, Valjean quietly dressed, and stealthily placed the bishop’s silverware into his backpack.

Within an hour, he was arrested and the policeman brought him back to the bishop’s home. “Father, we caught this scoundrel with your silverware hidden inside his pack, but he insists that you gave him the silver as a gift!” The bishop looked at Valjean with love, and then said to the officer, “Sir, the man tells the truth. But in his haste, he left behind these silver candlesticks which I also gave to him.”

The priest just saved Jean Valjean’s life, and Valjean was deeply grateful. But for the rest of his life, Jean Valjean was tormented by that overwhelming act of love. How does he

live when he has been loved so unconditionally? Thank you seemed so trite. He can never pay it back. And he has to go through his life with a burden; a debt that feels worse than prison.

I wonder if that's how people feel who have been heroically and spectacularly saved from danger. I mean, if someone jumped in front of a speeding car and saved you, but they died, how would you live with that? If someone gave you a kidney, and in the surgery, you lived but they died, wouldn't the guilt overwhelm you?

That's the problem with love. When someone loves you so deeply and so entirely, you live the remainder of your life under obligation. They are dead, you can't pay them back. They are gone, you can't possibly say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." But the message they are able to send from the grave is this, "Whether you like it or not, I love you."

Before the bishop bid farewell to Jean Valjean, he gave him a directive;

*You must use this precious silver  
to become an honest man,  
God has raised you out of darkness  
I have saved your soul for God*

And that is what gave purpose to the remainder of Jean Valjean's life.

All of this begs the question for us; for if we have recognized the astonishing truth that God has raised each of us out of darkness, how are we to live our lives. Thank you seems trite, yet we say it every Sunday. We can't pay God back, though that doesn't prevent us from doing good works to appease God. So how do we live? What is our purpose as forgiven sinners – for Saints who have been raised out of darkness and into Light? And in the end, the only purpose I can think of is that we would do the same for others. Lutheran language would call us to "love God and serve our neighbor." Using the contemporary vernacular, it would mean that we are called to "pay it forward." But ultimately, it would mean that as people of gratitude would live kind and generous lives, emulating the love of Jesus in any way we can.

You want a purpose for your life? **Live a kind and generous life, emulating the love of Jesus in any way you can.** You want a purpose for your church? Be a kind and generous church and emulate the love of Jesus in any way you can. Now that is the gospel in a nutshell.

Just one more story and I'm through;

In March of 1633, the bubonic plague was ravaging southern Europe. In the tiny village of Oberammergau, Austria, population 5000, people were dying at the rate of 20 per month. The citizens gathered during this dark time and made a sacred pledge to God: “Jesus, if you protect us, we will forever tell the story of you suffering, death and resurrection.” Legend has it that after the vow was made, there was not even one further case of Bubonic Plague in the village and those town members that already were afflicted recovered. The people kept their word, those people, and for the past five centuries, every ten years, the whole town performs “The Passion Play” to thousands of guest from around the world.

Their purpose was not to illustrate the *problem* with love. Theirs is a story about the *power* of love. And may that be our story as well. As we prepare to watch the passion of Jesus once again this Lenten season, may we be reminded that it leads to the most powerful love story of human history; the story of a God who loves the world, no matter what. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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