

Rich in Mercy

Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3: 14-21

The mantra of most of American Christianity is, “God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son... so that whoever believes in him will not die, but have eternal life.” As a chaplain working with veterans, I heard something similar all the time. If I just believe harder, I will be saved and things will get better. My financial troubles, my grief, my addiction will resolve itself. The focus was on the head over the heart. If they could make themselves believe the Jesus story more, then God would reward them. The thought was redemption comes to those who unwaveringly believe Jesus died on the cross to save them. It’s a straightforward transactional faith. I do x, and God promises y. We could say this is putting a personal relationship with Christ front and center. Actually, this is putting a personal relationship with Christ above all other things. It replaces all other things. Rugged individualism over beloved community.

Martin Luther, the early Reformation thinker, famously called this morning’s reading the “gospel in miniature.” He saw it as a perfect encapsulation of his, and our, Christian faith. “God so loved the world” *is* at the heart of our faith. But, it isn’t in that transactional equation of belief equals unequivocal salvation. If you’ve sat in a pew long enough, or had the opportunity to study a bit of theology with diverse thinkers, then you know there is so much more to everything in the bible. Nothing is so cut and dry for life is never so cut and dry. Scripture, like our experience of the world, is nuanced and layered.

The complexity begins in the very beginning of this saying. “God so loved the world.” It says God loved the *kosmos*, the cosmos/the world. It doesn’t say God loved humanity or humankind. God loved the whole world. God loved God’s creation – all of it – so much God gave a Unique Son.

So, right away there is a small problem with our original equation. God gave God’s son not for our salvation alone. Christ was given for the entire created world. God wants the whole created world to be saved – not merely my soul or your soul.

Scholars and theologians who wrestle often with the Gospel of John agree that a central theme in John is “being in Christ.” Being in Christ is what John found to be important. We hear this mirrored in the Apostle Paul’s writing to the believers in Corinth. Paul describes the community of Christ followers as the body of Christ. Being in Christ is being the body of Christ. We are to be the hands and feet of Christ in our world. We become one with something so much greater than any one of us. It is eternal and in it we touch eternal life. Throughout the Gospel of John, we are reminded that the promise of eternal life is not an after-death thing. It can be experienced right here and right now. It can be experienced whenever we touch the light of God.

As we peel back the text to another layer, we find the word for love. The Greek word for the love used in our John reading is *agapo* - agape. It could have been *philia*, love between friends, or *storge*, the love of a parent for a child. But, it is agape. Agape is unconditional, empathetic, redemptive love. “This isn’t a love which says ‘choose me or die’.” That isn’t love. This world doesn’t need any more of that kind of “love”. Surely, that notion of “love” does exist in this world. “That kind of love is called abusive and narcissistic.”

What John tells us about is agape. “Agape is loving deeply and expansively. It is not condemnation. It is not separation. This kind of affection richly yearns for everyone to experience this love: to trust in this love, to be able to lean back and be held in this love, to rejoice in this love, to be transformed in this love into a deep courageous person who extends this love to the entire cosmos themselves.”¹ That is the power of God’s love.

To keep it for ourselves alone is cheap. It is cheap grace and lacking in mercy. It, surely, is not what Christ gave his life for.

In the 2019 movie, *Just Mercy*, we see an entirely different kind of grace: one rich in the kind of love John was getting at. It is rich in mercy and full of action. *Just Mercy* is the story of Bryan Stevenson, a recent law school graduate who leaves behind the trappings of being a Harvard Law graduate and starts the Equality Justice Initiative in Mobile, Alabama. Stevenson dedicates his life to helping those wrongfully convicted seek justice. The movie centers on the case of Walter McMillian, a black man who was convicted solely on the testimony of a convicted felon in exchange for a lighter sentence in a separate case. It did not matter to the sheriff or the prosecutor at the time that McMillian was at home with his family working on rebuilding his truck’s transmission at the time of the murder. They suppressed any and all evidence which pointed to his innocence. The fruit of their labor was McMillian’s conviction. He was summarily convicted and sentenced to death by electrocution after less than an hour of deliberation.

The people who fabricated McMillian’s guilt were children of wrath. They were lost: “following the course of this world” as Ephesians would put it. They followed the spirit at work among the disobedient. This was not the work of children of the light. This was not the work of children in Christ; however, I would wager many of them would think of themselves as saved children of God. They would look at John 3:16 and say, “I believe; therefore, I am saved.” Yet, their actions are not the actions of someone filled with God’s light.

This is an example of how Jesus could come into the world, the light of God could come into this world, and still people can love the darkness. The Gospel of John tells us, “people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” In the throes of this darkness, they dare not come into the light for coming towards the light would reveal their deeds. Instead, they often make self-righteous claims of being in God by doing God’s work of keeping order and social cohesion.

The light, however, is not afraid to be discovered. It has nothing to hide. Those whose actions are true do not fear the light of day. When their actions are brought out into the light, all can see it is the work of God. That is what I see in Stevenson’s pursuit of justice for McMillian. Stevenson pushes the Alabama court system to right this wrong. He pushes them to expose the damage created by hiding the prosecution’s misdeeds. Stevenson pushes society to turn towards the light.

It is not an easy road. There are many bumps: many trials and tribulations. When Stevenson is beginning to feel lost in his pursuit of justice for McMillian, he sits with a colleague to reflect. In the midst of this, Eva Ansley turns to Stevenson and says to him, “You choose to get close to every one of them [your clients]. You love them like they are your family. And, when your family is hurting, you’re hurting.”

¹ Loosely quoted from my memory of the Rev. Michael Kinman’s sermon at All Saints Pasadena on March 11, 2018

When your family is hurting, you are hurting ... That is agape. That is empathetic love. That is the light of Christ. It is the kind of love that would cause God to send Jesus into the world. It is the kind of love that would compel Jesus to become the Christ. It is the kind of love that draws the children of God towards the light: towards actions which drive away the darkness.

Now for the hard part. *Kosmos*. God loves the whole created world and wants the whole created world to be brought into light and love. Our task is to keep stretching our definition of family, neighbor, community. Our task is to keep stretching ourselves to spread agape far and wide. We are not to spread it in a zero-sum game of believe or die, but to share the light in ways that make God known without words. Children of the light are known not by proclamation, but by the richness of their mercy and the depth of their grace.

God's love is so great. It is a love so big and so deep it holds the whole world. There is no scarcity. There is no need to get in line and hope it doesn't run out before it's your turn. God's love is abundant; there's room for you and for me. There is room for all of creation: great and small. As we continue to wrestle with how to be in Christ, and how to be the body of Christ in this shifting landscape of pandemic life, may this agape... may this unbounded love of God be the light which guides us out of darkness and into the eternal life we can touch right here and right now.