

"THE WORLD IS OUR PARISH"

John 3:16-21

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It has been said that life is a little bit like buttoning up a coat. It is hard to come out right if you start wrong. The buttonhole principle can be applied to our religion too. The first basic buttonhole principle of Christian faith is this:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but should have everlasting life.

Martin Luther said John 3:16 is the gospel in miniature. Evangelical fans at professional football games put it on banners for all the world to see. Many of us in this place learned it from our mother's knees. In times like these, which try our souls, we will be wise to return to the first-button basics of our faith.

The sermon is really contained in four words this morning. The four words are these: God Loves! Will We?

God Loves! God so loved the world that he gave. Love is so much of the nature of God that the writer of John said God himself is love.

James Mitchner in his play, *The Source*, explores pagan life in previous centuries. In one scene, a young woman stands at the door weeping as her husband takes their first-born son to the temple for a child sacrifice. A little later she weeps again as her husband returns to the temple to consort with temple prostitutes in a ritual of fertility rights. In despair the wife laments: "If he had a different God he would be a different man." "If he had a different God, he would be a different man."

America is engaged in a war unlike any war in our history. We are fighting terrorists led by extremist Osama bin Laden. Mr. bin Laden is no mad man gone wild; he is a holy man gone fanatic. He is to the Muslim religion what the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity. In his twisted view of God, he has

declared a Holy War against the United States in a grudge match that dates back to the Crusades. For this cause his followers are willing to give their lives as martyrs. When I read the story of Mr. bin Laden, I come away pondering that statement out of Mitchner's play, "If he had a different God he would be a different man."

The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, not even the God of Islam or Buddhists or Hindus can support this kind of cruelty. Christians particularly need to be careful not to turn the tragedy of September 11 into an "act of God" designed to shock America back to faith. To do so is to make Mr. bin Laden a participant in God's plan. I abhor even the thought of that. **God Loves!**

God loves the world. I don't know why, but he does. He loves the world when it is lovely and he loves those of us who are not so lovely. An eight-year-old boy wrote this note to his pastor:

Dear Pastor,

I know God loves everybody, but he surely never met my sister.

Sincerely,

Arnold.

There is probably a little bit of Arnold in all of us. Nevertheless, God loves us.

Back in 1817, Frederick Lehman wrote a hymn about it:

*"The Love of God is greater far, than tongue or pen can ever tell
It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell.
O Love of God how rich and pure, How marvelous and strong.
It shall forever more endure, the saints and angels song."*

Let us never forget even in our anger and our fear, that God himself, by his very nature, is a God of love.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," says the Text. This love of God is not sentimental, but sacrificial. This love of God is not mushy, but masterful. This love of God is not easy; it is astounding.

Sometimes critics of religion say, "Get real." Sometimes I say in response, "How real do you want us to get?" The Son of God was beaten like a common criminal, the nails were driven through his flesh, the thorns were pounded into his brow, the thirst was unbearable, the death was unthinkable. Even hardened soldiers broke down at his death. Just how real do you want

us to get?

However we might interpret the silence of God in suffering, the impotence of the Almighty in terror, the problem of evil in the universe, at least God had the courage to take his own medicine. He gave his own Son.

A brokenhearted mother exclaims to her pastor, "Where was God when my son died?" An insightful pastor replied, "In the very same place he was when his own Son died." Isaiah put it this way. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed."

If we Americans make sense out of this horrible thing that has happened to us we will do well to revisit the cross of Christ. We will learn from our Lord how to take the worst that evil can dish out to us and transform it into something that is redemptive for all of humankind. We will take a tragic Tuesday, like that awful Friday, and when we are finished with it, it will become Resurrection Sunday for humanity.

God loves the world. That's a fact, but there are questions that remain. Will we? How can we? Dare we love the world? Will we move from self-centeredness to sacrificial service? Will this event that has become a part of our history and a part of our experience transform us and change us and make us different human beings? That is the question.

The first week of September, Todd and Lisa Beamer spent a romantic vacation in Italy. On September 11, Todd kissed his wife and boys goodbye, boarded United flight 93, headed for a sales meeting in Northern California. A supervisor of GTE Airfone received a desperate call from Todd that morning reporting the plane had been hijacked. He asked his supervisor to call Lisa and tell her how much he loved her. Then he asked that same supervisor if she would pray the Lord's Prayer with him and they prayed it together. He explained to the supervisor that a group of the passengers were going to overtake the hijackers. With the words, "Help me God. Help me Jesus," this Sunday School teacher and father of two boys, said to his helpmates "Let's roll guys." A few minutes later, flight 93 crashed, killing everybody on board, but aborting the hijackers assumed mission of striking the White House. Todd Beamer put the needs of others above his own fears. "His example of courage has given me and my boys a reason to

live," said his widow.

Yesterday, I was flying home from Kansas City from a church meeting. As I sat on that plane I tried to imagine what it must have been like on that hijacked airplane. I have got a big imagination, but I could not, in my wildest imagination, begin to comprehend what must have been going on in the minds and hearts of people there. I just could not grasp it. It was too much. My imagination failed me.

But then, another question struck me in the air. "If this were to happen now, what would you do, Howard? How would you respond?" Maybe I'm revealing my anxiety about flying. At least a half dozen other people told me they had the same anxious moments on airplanes in the last couple of weeks. What would you do? What kind of sacrificial lives are we willing to live? Isaac Watts asked long ago:

*"Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease
While others fight to win the prize and sail through bloody seas?
Sure I must fight if I would reign, increase my courage, Lord.
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by thy word."*

Today it is time to move from self-indulgence to sacrificial service for the sake of the world. That would be a dramatic move for most of us.

It is time to make a move today. It is time to make a move from "my country" to "world community." While the resurgence of patriotism is refreshing in America, it will take more than an American spirit to get us through the days ahead. We are a world community, influenced by a world economy, woven together in a web of interdependence. I do not need to tell you that. You know that much better than I. Particularly you in business in this community know how much we are interdependent upon one another.

Once upon a time, people might have been free to do their own thing. After all, rugged individualism is the American way of life. When they got a little crowded, our forefathers and foremothers moved further and further west to sustain their independence. When things got difficult, you and I escaped to the suburbs so we could live the good life and the safe life. World problems were not our problems. Sometimes we've felt sorry for the children of Africa. Occasionally, we have felt concern for the refugees of Afghanistan. But those people seemed far removed from our way of life. But, I need to tell you today; they are not very far away anymore. We are an intertwined community. The time has come where we must learn to live together as

brothers and sisters around the world, or we will perish apart as fools. There may have been a time when we could talk about love as some sort of high idealism, but I say to you today, it is severe reality in order for us to survive. Let us be encouraged that at least in part, we are fighting this war by dropping bread as well as bombs. Let us be encouraged. Let us support humanitarian efforts, even in other countries.

So we gather for worship on World Wide Communion Sunday. Isn't it interesting that this has happened to us at this moment in time? Christians around the world affirm our unity today through the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In the 1990's, independence reigned in the Church. Consumer minded members flocked to entrepreneurial pastors who built independent churches to meet the needs of their customers. That era ended a few weeks ago.

When John Wesley took his preaching to the fields, the bishop of Bristol ordered him to stop. "You have no business here," said the bishop. "You are not commissioned to preach in this diocese." In response to that condemnation, John Wesley made that famous statement that you and I know, "The world is my parish." "The world is my parish." And I say on this World Communion Sunday, we would be wise to reclaim our heritage. More than any other Protestant denomination in America, United Methodists are capable of embracing a worldwide fellowship. We have the possibility and the opportunity to do that. The opportunity of leadership in America at this moment lies in our hands. The question is, will we rise to the occasion and use the network we have worldwide to lead this world to a higher level of living? The question is before us as people of faith.

A man stood before God, his heart breaking from the injustice of the world. "Dear God," said the man, "look at all the suffering, anguish, and destruction of humanity. Why, in your own name, didn't you do something about it?" Almighty God replied by saying, "I did, I sent you. I sent you."

God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Though we may make eloquent speeches and have knowledge to unpack humanity's DNA, and even give our goods in great acts of philanthropy, without love we are nothing. Love, love, love, love, the gospel in a word is LOVE. May we at this table so receive love that we may be empowered to share it with all the world. Amen.

