

Theme: We act out of love and in love

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we give you thanks for the great love you have for us; infuse us with your love and guide us in the light, that we may reflect that light to this broken world, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Fred Craddock tells the story of his father, who spent years of his life hiding from the God who was seeking him out:

“When the pastor used to come from my mother’s church to call on him, my father would say, ‘You don’t care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn’t that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.’

“My nervous mother would run to the kitchen, crying, for fear somebody’s feelings would be hurt. When we had an evangelistic campaign the pastor would bring the evangelist, introduce him to my father and then say, ‘Sic him, get him! Sic him, get him!’ My father would always say the same thing. ‘You don’t care about me! Another name, another pledge. Another name, another pledge! I know about churches.’

“I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time he didn’t say it. He was at the Veteran’s Hospital. He was down to 74 pounds. They had taken out the throat, put in a metal tube, and said, ‘Mr. Craddock, you should have come earlier. But this cancer is awfully far advanced. We’ll give radium, but we don’t know.’

“I went in to see him. In every window—potted plants and flowers. Everywhere there was a place to set them—potted plants and flowers. Even in that thing that swings out over your bed they put food on, there was a big flower. There was by his bed a stack of cards 10 or 15 inches deep. I looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers.

“I read the cards beside his bed. And I want to tell you, every card, every blossom, every potted plant from groups, Sunday School classes, women’s groups, youth groups, men’s bible class, of my mother’s church—every one of them. My father saw me reading them.

“He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. . . . He wrote on the side, ‘In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.’ I said, ‘What is your story, Daddy?’ And he wrote, ‘I was wrong.’”

It is not until you know God is seeking you in love, not in condemnation; it is not until that moment that the gospel becomes Good News for you.

Our gospel reading is a continuation of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in the middle of the night. Earlier in the conversation, Jesus explains to Nicodemus the necessity of being born from above, by the Spirit, in order to see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus still doesn’t understand what Jesus is saying. He says, “How can these things be?” Jesus says that he needs to understand earthly things before he can understand heavenly things. Then Jesus says the only one who can ascend into heaven is the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

The very next thing Jesus says is about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. When the people of Israel were making their sojourn through the Sinai, they ran into a bunch of fiery, poisonous snakes and were bit. And many died. The people petitioned Moses, “We sinned against the LORD and against you. Ask the LORD to take away the serpents.”

So Moses prayed. God told Moses to make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole. When the people see the serpent on the pole, they will be cured. And hospitals copied the serpent pole, put it on their buildings ever since. This may be effective for snake bites, but may not be useful for other ailments that cause us to be hospitalized.

Nicodemus was familiar with the reference. Jesus continues to say that just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so will the Son of Man be lifted up. And anyone who believes in the Son of Man lifted up on a pole, that one will have eternal life. Gazing at the Son of Man on the cross leads to life saving benefits.

Jesus is also hinting at the lifting up of the Son of Man, during the ascension, leading to eternal life. Jesus’ return to heaven starts at the cross.

The humiliation of crucifixion is the glory of the exultation of Christ. There is no crown without a cross.

The reason that one will have eternal life is because God loved the world so much, that God gave an only son, so that, anyone who believes in the son will never die like the Israelites in the wilderness, but they will have everlasting life. This is incarnational, but the cross looms in the background. God didn't send the son to condemn the world, but instead to save the world. No one who has faith in God's son will be condemned. But those who do not believe are condemned. We pronounce our own judgment.

This is the crisis the world is in: light came into the world and there were people who ran for the darkness. They went to the darkness because they loved evil more than they loved the light. In the darkness, where people have trouble seeing what is going on, they work their evil schemes. These people hate the light, because their evil deeds would be for anyone to see. They are addicted to denial and illusion and they fear exposure.

But people, who live by truth, will come to the light. It is there that everyone sees what God is doing through the people of light. Nicodemus is attracted to the light that is Jesus Christ. The Greek word for judgment is *krisis*. The coming of Jesus provokes a crisis forcing us into a decision. Will we live in the light or will we live in the darkness?

Jesus is answering a question of why some people are attracted to the light of the world and why some are not. When John talks about eternal life, John is talking about life after this one and an intimate relationship with God and Christ in this life. To reject God and Christ is what John calls condemnation. Condemnation is the absence of communion with God. Though John implies that the door to God is closed if the right decision is not made, elsewhere he implies that the door is left open.

God is involved with us in leading moral lives. God draws the morally upright – not implying that even the upright don't make moral mistakes. But *wanting* to do the right thing draws us to God. Those who claim to want to do the right thing and reject God, fail to see the goodness of the world and fail to see the goodness of creation. Or they simply don't understand it.

They may consider themselves moral without the need of God as a crutch. But they are refusing the help that can lead them into a more productive life. They think that an individual can achieve anything. But they fail to understand that we cannot achieve anything of lasting value by ourselves.

It is only with God, in community, that lasting value in society is achieved. That is God's commission to every single Christian. It is our task that we accept by being a member of the church through baptism. Belief and good works are bound together with God. God wants to save the entire world. We are responsible for the outcome.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, we thank for the gift of love; through your love we respond to you in love; through your love we respond in love to those around us and to total strangers; may we always abide in your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **John 3:14-21** (NRSV)

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.ⁱ

¹⁶ "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.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."^j

ⁱ Some interpreters hold that the quotation concludes with verse 15

^j Some interpreters hold that the quotation concludes with verse 15

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.