

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, February 20, 2011.*

Lent 2, 2011 John 3:1-17 *"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. "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."*

If I were to go around this room, asking folks to recite one verse from the Bible, one verse from memory, my guess is what would immediately pop into many of your heads 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." You might quote the King James version and include "only begotten Son" and "whosoever", but all the while, that would be the verse. It is a verse most of us have known since childhood; a verse we see held up on signs at sporting events, written on tee shirts, on bumper stickers, even billboards. Arguably one of the most famous verses in the Bible. The reason people display this verse and hold it in such high esteem is that they believe it is the central message of the Gospel; the Gospel in a nutshell, if you will. There is wonderful language in this verse – there is God, there is the Son, there is sacrifice, there is hope of eternal life. There is redemption.

For a few minutes I want to focus on the smallest word in this verse – so. S—O, so. This little word can be used in many different ways. You can say, "Are you going to EYC this evening? SO am I" or, "SO, it's you!" or "SO what?" Or you can say "I read a page or SO in that book." Even a grammar freak like me won't bother you with the specific part of speech of each of these, but you can see that the word SO can be used in several ways.

I want us to think of how SO can be used to show emphasis, like "I am SO excited" or "I am SO angry." The word SO can be used to express intense emotion. "I feel SO happy today."

For example, 2 weeks ago when I was in the mountains with my son and his family, the weather was cold and dreary. So-so, we might describe it. But one evening Mike prepared an amazing dinner with ingredients from his garden and root cellar, and as I pushed back from the table, very satisfied, I said, "That was SO good, SO delicious." The little word SO revealed my inner feelings of delight.

'So' is even stronger than the word "very". In one final example, we had an unpleasant experience at my school this week with a handful of high school students who were behaving in an especially inappropriate way. More than one of us teachers said, "I am SO upset with them."

It is with this background that we move to the Gospel lesson for today. God SO loved the world --- the word SO expresses the intensity of God's feelings for the world. I am not a student of Greek --- that should come as no surprise to anyone. But as I read in preparation for this sermon, the importance of the translation from Greek of this passage came up several times. It seems that in Greek the word 'houtos' can be used in many different ways like the English word 'so'. But only rarely in Greek is the word houtos ever used to express deep feelings. Only rarely and for very special emphasis. In fact, there are only 2 places in John's Gospel where houtos is used to express deep and intense emotion. In both verses, it is the same –John 3:16 says that God SO loved the world...and John 4:11 says "...if God loved us SO much, ought we not also love one another?"

Now, if I say, "I love my granddaughter SO much" would not that reveal the inner intensity of feeling that I have for her? We don't say those words to or about just anyone. We reserve the word SO or the phrase SO MUCH for special people and special relationships. Similarly, when God says, "I love you SO much" those words are reserved for a special relationships. God SO loved... God deeply and intensely and purely and totally and always loved....

Let's add to "God SO loved" the next phrase in the verse which is the WORLD. God so loved the world.... Not just the church. Not just Christians. THE WORLD. Not just good people who stay out of trouble. Not just you and me. THE WORLD. Buddhists and Muslims and Hindus. Americans and

Japanese and Iraqis. And Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists and Mormons. THE WORLD. Good people and bad people. White and black and red and brown people. God SO LOVED the World.

It is not merely God so loved me. It's not merely, God so loved you. But God so loved the WORLD. That is what is amazing. That God loves people who don't love God, who don't believe in God, who could care less about God. People who say, "I don't need God." God loves the world, and the world does not love God. That is absolutely amazing. Amazing that the intensity of God's emotion is for the world.

This kind of love works miracles. This kind of love caused the blind to see and the deaf to hear. It raised the dead and healed the sick. This is the kind of love embodied in Jesus Christ.

This is radical, transforming love. This love welcomes the outcast, the sinner, the prostitute. This love transformed lives – like Nicodemus - and continues to transform lives. This is the love that causes us to drop what we are doing and help a neighbor. This is the love that makes us want to provide food and shelter for those who have none. This is the love that directs us to help our brothers and sisters in the far reaches of the world, in Japan, New Zealand, Haiti, and Belize. This is a sacrificial love. It was this love that chose the cross, not for glory, but for you and me. It is the love that came down and was born in a lowly manger and died on an old rugged cross, but that could not really die because 3 days later this love raised Christ from the dead. This love will come back and bring peace and renewal to all things in the world. We need to search for this kind of love in our own lives.

One more phrase as we look at this Gospel lesson, "eternal life." We all know what that means, right? It means getting into heaven and living with Christ for all eternity. Once again the Greek word is important – it is "aionion" which also can mean "life in this age". So this verse can also mean that God gave his Son so that we can have a renewal in this life as well as the promise of the life to come. What does that mean to us as Christians? As Episcopalians? It means that our everlasting life does not begin when we die. It begins now. When we are "born from above" we gain everlasting life through Christ. We gain blessings from God in this life as well as the life to come. When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the Temple was torn. This symbolizes how we can have a relationship with God through Christ now and in the life to come. We should not put our faith in a bottle only to be opened on Sunday mornings and when we get to Heaven. It means that our lives are blessed beyond words; we gain everything through Christ. Everlasting life means that we live in the eternal presence of God now and forever.

Our journey with God has already begun. We have been reborn in the Spirit by our baptism. We are born again in the Spirit by the love of God. When we follow the teachings of Christ, when we do work for the kingdom, when we love others as God loves us, we have everlasting life.

And finally, John writes, "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."

Here, still early in the season of Lent, we stop to remember why we are here. We are on the way of the cross not because of what we have done or left undone, but because of what God has done. Amazing love. SO loved... Jesus was sent not to scold, but to save. It was out of love that he came among us and stood beside us and died with us, for us and saved us. Love. This is why we make the journey through Lent on our knees, not because of sackcloth, with no chocolate or coffee, or even having added a new discipline to our lives. It is love that puts us here, at this table, in this season, with each other. We kneel because we are brought to our knees by the sheer wonder and awe at the gift. It was not to condemn us that our Lord bid us bear His cross, but to save us. We are here not as the lost, but as the found.

The cross is heavy and the clouds will gather. We will have more days for honesty, more time to examine our lives again and pray for the courage to follow, for the ways in which we betray so great a love. Lent is not over; there is more repenting to be done. But as we turn ourselves again in the direction of the upward climb to Calvary, let us keep these words in our hearts:

"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. 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." Amen.

William Willimon, Edward Marquardt.