



Poland Presbyterian Church
At the Green since 1802

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Loving the World... Without Being Worldly
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John 3:1-17

A Lenten Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'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. The Word of the Lord...

I had a tough day a few weeks ago. Nothing horrible, but just one of those days where the tasks seemed to pile up. There were more emails than I could answer and my cell phone kept ringing with a host of different things, all demanding my attention. On top of everything, my computer didn't work quite right. When I got home that evening I was muttering under my breath about the difficult day I had. I was, of course, looking for sympathy and understanding from Karen.

It seems that she also had a trying day. When she got the mail that day, she discovered that an error was made when we tried to change my car over Ohio plates. Instead of showing me as the owner, the new certificate indicated that I had sold the car to one "Brian J. Eelman". We also got a call from the propane gas company that services our home in Pennsylvania. They called to tell us that they would not be able to fill up our propane tank because the company we hired to clear the driveway had not done it. Consequently, she spent the morning trying to contact the plowing company... to no avail. There were a few other things that happened that day that required Karen to be on the phone for the better part of an afternoon. Most of that time "on hold" waiting for a real person to address the issues.

And so both of us commiserated about how life seemed to be getting more complicated, demanding and tiring. In the course of our "whining session" Karen remarked, "sometimes this is a difficult and unlovable world."

At times it does seem like a difficult, hard, and unlovable world. Not just on the bad days. It is a world where natural disaster strikes: from the Boston area which is recovering from an unbelievable winter that has destroyed homes and jobs, to the central U.S. where we, with millions of others, lived through the cold and storms of this severe winter.

It is world where human cruelty often reigns; where people are persecuted and brutally murdered because of their beliefs, their ethnic heritage, or their place of birth. Last Sunday as we listened to Elmarie Parker, we were reminded that persecution has become a way of life in parts of the Middle East.

Closer to home, it is a world with bullying, and cruelty. It is a world where racism still rears its ugly head on our university campuses. It is a world that is often fraught with conflict, misunderstanding and pain.

It is also a noisy world; a world that is encroaching on any type of solitary time we might need... cell phones, text messages, email and the like constantly bombard us, demanding our attention and our time. It is so bad that a recent article in the New York Times told about a business class lounge at DeGaulle Airport in Paris that guaranteed silence, no intrusion or interruptions. (*The Cost of Paying Attention, NYTimes February 7, 2015*). Commuter trains in Washington D.C. and Philadelphia now have "quiet cars" where commuters may experience quiet space without the noises of cell phone conversations and the beeping and buzzing of the electronic devices that multiply daily.

It is not only noisy, it is filled with anger and rage, with demanding people, and there are days when the sun never comes out.a difficult, hard world. Sometimes it is hard to find a reason to love this world.....

But that is precisely the message of the Gospel. God loves the world!

Christ proclaimed in John's gospel that this world, the world I just described: this world is the world God loves. God so loved this world, with all its imperfections, all its craziness, all the demands it makes, all the evil that pervades it... God so loved this world that he gave his son for its salvation. God loves this world and God chooses not to condemn it, not to ignore it; not to destroy it. God loves this world and all of creation so much that God chooses in freedom to rescue it, to save it.

That is the message of good news for this morning. This world that you and I inhabit; this world that sometimes weighs heavily upon us; this world that often seems hard and unforgiving, is the object of God's love. God has not abandoned this world, and we should not either.

3 points: 1- God's love for this world. 2- Loving what God loved. 3- Loving God's world without being worldly.

I

God so loved this world. There is a tendency in Christianity to spiritualize the message of the bible. Certainly the bible addresses spiritual matters. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the necessity of "being born from above", but the core message of the bible addresses the challenge of living as spiritual creatures, born from above, in this material world: a world God created good, a world God loves. Consider God's relationship to the world and the "this worldly" emphasis of the Bible:

- From the opening verses of the Bible we read that God created the world. The material world did not exist until God created it.
- The Christmas message is that God, in Jesus Christ, became flesh like you and me. Christ lived in this world and walked among us as one of us.
- The hope that we declare on Easter and at funerals and memorial services is the *resurrection of the body*... not the immortality of the spirit.

Hellenistic philosophy from Socrates and Plato to the Stoics denigrated things material in favor of the ideal and spiritual. But Christian faith is not Greek philosophy. We believe that God created this world and also loves it. We believe that God created human beings and loves them. God loves you and loves me. And so we teach our children to sing, "Jesus loves me this I know." We believe that God became flesh, (assumed a material existence), to live among us and to love us!

Christian faith takes seriously the world God created. It is not merely a faith that declares, "We'll get pie in the sky, bye and bye..." It is faith that proclaims the value of this world and the creatures that inhabit it... including you and me! It proclaims salvation for the whole person... and declares salvation in present, recalling the words of Jesus to the criminal next to him, "This day you will be in paradise with me!"

Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom of heaven... but also taught us to pray: "thy kingdom come on earth... as it is in heaven." God so loved this world...

II

Loving what God loves. The weather is getting warmer and my mind is beginning to think about fishing. Often times Karen or my daughter will join me when I am fishing. They are not crazy about fishing and can probably take or leave it... but they come along and enjoy themselves, because they love me. That is one of the qualities of love... we learn to love the things that our loved ones hold dear. Love is a blessing. We show our love and share this blessing, by learning to love what others love. We show our love for God and live as a blessing by loving what God loves.

"God so loved the world." We love God and are called to love this world because God loves it. We are called to love what God regards as precious; what God gave his son, Jesus Christ, to save. We are called to be good stewards of creation... to take care of God's world, because God loves it.

Consider: if someone lent you a prized possession, a classic car, or some other valuable item, would you abuse it? How would they feel? God has placed us on this earth, (God's precious creation), and entrusted us with its care. How can we abuse, bruise, destroy, hurt, injure, and desecrate that which God loves so much. God so loved the world.

III

Loving God's world without being consumed by it. This is the challenge that Christians face. We often substitute ownership and control for loving. Love is a relationship. Ownership and control is the antithesis of a relationship. When we love another, that love does not manifest itself in controlling behavior. Nor do we own someone when we love them. Loving the world that God loves involves the following;

1. Recognizing that we do not own the world. I got up this morning and washed up. I put on my clothes, drank my coffee, read my paper, got in my car, and came to my office "my, my, my, mine!!!!" No! The Psalmist declared, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof!" (Psalm 24.1) Loving the world involves relinquishing ownership of it. It does not mean we don't enjoy the world! It does not mean we don't use the resources of

this world. No, it acknowledges that in the great scheme of things, the things of this world are not ours forever.

2. Loving the world requires care. We don't abuse that which we love. We don't neglect that which we love. God created this world and all that is in it... including humanity. Loving God's world is a recognition that we are called to care for it. It is also a affirmation that we are our sister and brother's keeper.... Even when we don't like them. They are part of the world that God loves.
3. Loving the world is a recognition that we are sojourners in this world. We are here to enjoy it, but knowing also that we will leave it. The book of Hebrews sums this up so succinctly: "For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come." (Heb. 13:4). But while we journey through God's world, we, too, should learn to love it... because He loves it.

I had a bad day a few weeks ago. We all have our bad days. The world seemed cruel and at odds with my hopes and intentions.... It often does. But this world that we sometimes despise... this world that we, at times wish to escape, is God's beloved world. It is worthy of our love.

God so loved the world. The challenge of Christian faith is to love this world in the same way God loves it. Amen.