

*Ready for a Change: Accepting God's Love*

John 3:14-21

Whitefish UMC

March 22, 2009

- † Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent—we're over half-way through it. In the old days of a gloomy Lent, this day was known as Refreshment Sunday. I think the tulip bulbs in the entryway must have known this—they are blooming right on time in order to refresh us.
- † Humor is another source of rejuvenation, so here's a riddle I heard last weekend: "Why did the Romans shut down the Coliseum? Because the lions were eating up all the prophets!"
- † Those "why questions" come up a lot, don't they? But most of them are not so frivolous. We are people of faith, but we ask a lot of why questions: Why does someone so good have to suffer? Why can't he find a way out of his depression? Why won't she ever learn from her mistakes? Why can't I get it right this time?
- † These are big questions, and we are meant to ask them. Why? Because it means that we are engaged in conversation with God and each other about important matters. That's how we grow and change, because if we really listen, we can learn from these questions, too.
- † Today we heard the scripture about Nicodemus, the young Pharisee, seeking Jesus under cover of night. Jesus tells him about being born again from above, and then says those overly-familiar lines that you see on baseball caps and in the stands at ball games.

- † “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.”
- † Do you find your attention shifting when you hear this phrase? It’s become almost overused, hasn’t it? And it’s become a litmus test for true Christian believers, too. I confess that I find myself cringing when it’s used that way.
- † But here’s a big why question for you: “Why does God so love the world that God gave the only Son?” Why would God do that? Why would God sacrifice the only Son?
- † Or in other words, “Why in the world does God so love us? Why does God so love our broken, messed-up world? Why in heaven’s name does God love ME?”
- † Now those are the really big why questions. There can’t be much logic to the answers. Think of all the reasons for God not to love the world, to love us, to love me. We are quick to judge, resentful, unforgiving, selfish, controlling, full of excuses—just to name a few of our faults.
- † As one writer says, it seems God loves the world in spite of the world. And not only does God love the world, but so lavishly loves it that God gave the only begotten Son. The answer is we worship a God more loving than our logic can begin to figure.
- † Which leads to another big question: how then, are we to respond to that kind of love?
- † Last weekend, thanks to Allen’s willingness to lead our worship here so beautifully, I spent three and a half days being a spiritual director for a Walk to Emmaus in Helena. It was in a Walk to Emmaus 22

years ago that I first began to learn truly how to respond to God's love. Until that time I had spent a lot of my life struggling with the idea of God. I had studied religion, taught classes, worked in the church. But I had never really let God love me truly, madly, and deeply. And I certainly hadn't opened my heart to God.

- † This last weekend while I was away in Helena, it struck me once again how much trouble we have really accepting that God loves us. More importantly, we have trouble accepting what that really means for our lives and for our world. We have a lot of trouble figuring out what to do with that immeasurable love.
- † Some of us have a lot of trouble accepting that we are lovable. Perhaps we've really made some bad mistakes with our lives, or people who were supposed to love us have convinced us that we are worthless.
- † Some of us are simply indifferent to this great-God-love—we don't need it and get along perfectly fine on our own, thank you very much. Until something comes along that rocks our comfortable world, and we are forced to face our own limitations.
- † Sometimes we think we get it, this God-love, but we are really clueless. Well-known preacher Fred Craddock tells this story:

I was in graduate school at Vanderbilt. I had left the family and children in the little parish I served and moved into a little room to prepare for those terrible comprehensive exams. It's make-it-or-break-it time; they can kill you. I would go every night about 11:30 or 12:00 to a little all-night diner—no tables, just little stools, and have a grilled cheese and a cup of coffee to take a break from my studies. It was the same every night; the fellow behind

the counter at the grill knew when I walked in to prepare a grilled cheese and a cup of coffee. He'd give me a refill, sometimes come again and give me another refill. I joined the men of the night sitting there hovering over coffee, still thinking about my own possible questions about the New Testament oral exams.

Then I noticed a man who was there when I went in but had not been waited on. I had *been* waited on, had a refill, and so had the others. Then finally the man behind the counter went to the man at the end of the counter and said, "What do you want?" He was an old, gray-haired, black man. Whatever the man said, the fellow went to the grill, scooped up a little dark patty off the back of the grill, and put it on a piece of bread without condiment and without a napkin. The cook handed it to the man, who gave him some money, and then went out the side door by the garbage can and out on the street. He sat on the curb with the eighteen-wheelers of the night with the salt and pepper from the street to season his sandwich.

I didn't say anything. I did not reprimand, protest, or witness to the cook. I did not go out and sit beside the man on the curb, on the edge. I didn't do anything. I was thinking about the questions coming up on the New Testament. And I left the little place, went up the hill back to my room to resume my studies, and off in the distance I heard a cock crow. (Craddock Stories)

† Lent is defined as a time of repentance, of turning toward God with all our hearts, as the Ash Wednesday service says. But first we have to listen and learn enough from our lives and the life of Christ to know

what that means. We often refer to the weeks preceding Easter as the Lenten journey.

- † Journey: it implies something. It implies that we end up different than when we began. Isn't that what a journey is all about? We start in one place and end up in another.
- † And that's the point of Lent: to reshape us, to bring us to new realizations and realities, to make us different people than when we began. First we're called to embrace the answer of God to this world, embrace the gift of Jesus Christ and recognize the love represented in it. That's the first part of the journey.
- † Next is asking the question of how that love is being reflected or deflected by our own lives—to hearing the moments when the cock crows or when God's love is claimed in our lives.
- † A few years ago, a wonderful young woman preacher—a wife and a mother to two young boys—wrote these words:
- † *Does God's love as we experience it in caring for one another leave us different from when we began? That's the question for us in the days of Lent. Do we leave different from when we began. As we walk the roads of reflection and discipline, do we open ourselves to hear the cock crow in the distance or to feel the loving arms of God around us in ways that won't allow us too continue on as we are? Do we ask the questions that allow us to really examine the response of our lives to Christ?*
- † *In Christ, light came into this world—light that illumines the darkness, light that allows for new beginnings in our lives, light that roots out evil, light that gives us hope for tomorrow and courage for*

*today. Our obligation then, is to open our lives in ways so that same light shines in us and through us to this broken and needy world.*

- † That young woman, Dana Ferguson, helped care for my sister Penny as she was dying when her transplanted lungs and heart failed. She had allowed God’s love to transform her so that she could offer that same love and hope to my sister.
- † A little while ago, I learned from Penny’s pastor that Dana herself had just died after battling an aggressive breast cancer. She left her two little boys, a devoted husband, and a grieving church. Of course even in her dying, she allowed that Christ light to shine in the darkness of grief over her impending death. She let God’s love transform her even in her dying.
- † And that’s the kind of love that we are meant to accept—no matter who we are or what we’ve done or how much we think we don’t really need it. Because the world needs it so—the world needs us.
- † That’s the love of Christ that transcends and transforms even death itself—the cruelest deaths that leave us gasping with those big “why questions.” On Wednesday night, Dawn brought some music and a video for our youth. Did you know that they were asked to offer worship for one evening when they attended Convo last month?
- † They chose a dramatic interpretation of the oh-so-familiar song “Amazing Grace.” Now that song may seem trite and over-used to some of us, at times, but our youth didn’t find it so.
- † I invite you to experience this video explaining the origins of the song Amazing Grace and interweaving a new song with it. Sing along. Let it wash over you. And let your life be different because of it.
- † (Play Amazing Grace video)

† Amen.

Sources:

This sermon is a response to one offered by Rev. Dana Ferguson before her illness and death claimed her. It is found in “Answering the Why,”

<http://fourthchurch.org>