



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



The Gift of Love

Text: John 3:11-17

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I have a fascination with words. If you've ever heard me utter one of my 1001 puns, you'll know that I love playing with words. We grapple with words all the time.

One word we wrestle with is the proper way to address a group using the second person plural. First person singular is 'you.' Officially second person plural is also, 'you,' but hardly anyone uses that word.

Formal Southern makes it 'you all.' More casually people refer to it as 'y'all.'

Some people just add an 's' and make it to be 'you's.'

In the Pennsylvania Dutch Country it was 'you ins.'

In New Jersey, where I grew up it was 'yuz.'

It's a word we all do a lot of stuff with.

So is the word 'love.' One of the great linguistic ironies between contemporary English and ancient Greek is that Ancient Greek is language where there is no short and simple way to say 'yes' or 'no,' but has three words for love, whereas English has a large number of words on many subjects and has only one word for 'love.'

I was struck the other day when I saw a truck carrying snack cakes and they had the words, "You will love them."

We love snack cakes, sports' teams, people, and things. One word with many variables.

Then we come to the love of God.

Which brings us to today's Scripture.

Jesus refers to a story in the *Book of Numbers*. The people were angry at their situation and began to curse Moses and God. God sent poisonous serpents into their midst and these serpents

began killing the people. The people repented and God had Moses make a poisonous serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole. Everyone who would look up at the raised up serpent would then be healed and live.

Jesus alludes to this story that when he is raised up and people look upon him, they will be healed and live. They will, ultimately be saved. And all of this is taking place because *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.* Scripture scholars have called this passage the Mission Statement of the Gospel and the Mission Statement for the life of Jesus.

I do have several observations about grappling with God's love.

The first is that all too often the whole concept of God's love is minimalized.

A few years ago I was at a conference and a question was asked. When you hear John 3:16, what is the first thing that came to mind. In thinking about the citation, not the words themselves, I had one thing that I thought of. Something, frankly, embarrassing. The first thing I thought of was....football.

Do you remember that whenever you'd watch a football game and they'd line up to kick and extra point or a field goal, someone was always holding up a sign that read, John 3:16.

While is is, on some level, laudable, because the person truly is trying to witness to something, they, in essence, are minimizing the strength of the words. The love of God is about depth of sacrifice and power. It doesn't always strike me as football material.

It's not unlike the bumper stickers and buttons people used to wear. *Smile! God Loves You.*

Again, nice sentiment, but not nearly as potent as one would expect it to be.

One of the most fascinating figures in Christianity in the 20th century was a German theologian/pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer spoke of God's love as grace and he had a serious concern that people viewed the love of God and grace way too cheaply. He wrote:

"Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

He came to this conclusion the hard way. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and a pacifist when Hitler came to power. Bonhoeffer studied for a bit in New York City and became friends with an African American pastor from Harlem. The experience of the Black Church, for him, was amazing and he fell in love with the spirituals----which were vastly different from what he was used to in Germany. Bonhoeffer saw the difficulties African Americans lived with in the 1930's and 1940's and began to parallel that with what was taking place in Germany. He ultimately went to Germany and taught underground for several years. He was implicated with the group that attempted

to assassinate Hitler and ultimately was hanged by the Nazis a month before the war ended.

For him, the love of God was not something you promoted at a football game; that was, to him, cheapening something incredibly profound. The love of God requires a radical response of discipleship.

Which brings me to my next point. The love of God requires a radical response of discipleship.

Suppose this. You look into the eyes of another person and you say the words, "I love you." You speak the words from the bottom of your heart. And the person you have spoken them to looks back at you and says....nothing. It would not, obviously, be the response you'd be looking for.

God's love is a radical kind of love. If you read the Bible and read about Moses, the 10 Commandments and the Law, you find out what God is hoping for. Ten simple rules.

And for century after century after century the people don't get it. We have prophet after prophet preaching and teaching.

Elijah massacres the priests and prophets of Baal.

Jeremiah barely escapes death several times.

Isaiah walks naked for a couple of years go get people's attention.

Dramatic stuff. People don't get it. God's love is simply not understood or returned. Sin prevails.

And God, with God's interesting sense of grace and justice, determines that the sin has a debt that must be paid but also wants to show mercy and compassion. So Jesus comes and pays the debt and demonstrates God's mercy and compassion.

This is a story of radical love and radical love calls for a radical response.

A couple of years ago our Stewardship Campaign slogan from the United Church of Christ said it really well. It was simply, 'loving God back.'

Loving God back does take place with stewardship. When we contribute to the ministry of the church, we are loving God back by enabling the church to do God's work.

Loving God back takes place whenever our choirs sing, Sunday School classes are taught, Committee and Council meetings take place.

We love God back with each person we are giving Christmas gifts to, with each article of clothing or blanket we give away, and with each person we feed in the Soup Kitchen.

God loves us profoundly and we are invited and challenged to not ignore God's statement of love, but to love God back with the passion and the zeal that God loves us with.

God's greatest gift to us was and is the coming of Jesus. With Jesus God has given us the gift of love in a radical way; we are invited to love God back with the same passion that God loves us.