

What Wondrous Love Is This?

Many people in our congregation have taken some courses past high school. When colleges or trade schools list the courses, they may have numbers attached to them. For example, if you were to study Religion or Theology and had signed up for the introductory course, you may be in Theology 101 or Intro to Religious Studies 101. As the numbers increase, the level of difficulty also increases. If we looked at the Gospel, we could give 101 or 201 status to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Together, we call these the synoptic gospels, as they are similar to each other.

The Gospel that is not the same as the others is John's Gospel. If we were to take a course on John's Gospel it would be a 300-level course or, if we were in graduate school, a 600-level course. What brings John's Gospel up to a higher level? While Mark, Matthew, and Luke were all written between 60-75 AD, John's Gospel was written later. Scholars estimate that this gospel was written between 90-100 AD for first and second-generation Christians in Asia Minor. The theme that comes through is Jesus as the Son of God.

In John's Gospel, we find events, stories, and words of Jesus that were not included in the others. These include

- Water into wine (John 2:1–11)
- Healing a royal official's son (John 4:46–54)
- Healing a disabled man (John 5:1–15)
- Feeding 5,000 (John 6:1–14)
- Walking on water (John 6:16–21)
- Healing a man born blind (John 9:1–12)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–43)

Many scripture scholars note that John's Gospel differs from the Synoptic Gospels in several ways: it covers a different period than the others; it locates much of Jesus' ministry in Judaea; and it portrays Jesus discoursing at length on theological matters. While Jesus still uses metaphorical language to which his followers can relate, it involves things that no one had heard. Why? Scholars believe that the first followers of "The Way" had to become familiar with other things first.

Another thing that I'd like you to pay attention to is the phrase, "Very truly, I tell you..." Scholars tell us that these words indicate that these are pretty close to direct quotes from Jesus. Let's hear these words again.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

As we draw near to Easter, the Lectionary gives us readings that predict the end times of Jesus' earthly life. Today is no different. If Jesus is the single grain of wheat that comes to an end, but bears much fruit in his followers and his mission. It will be up to his followers to spread the Good News throughout the world. What wondrous love IS this?

Throughout the Season of Lent/Season of Love, we have looked at various aspects of love that God has for us through Jesus. More than any other, his was a life lived from the best kind of love, rejecting the shackles of this world, and always looking to set people free for eternity. Through his ministry, he has already done so much to bring honor to the Father, but he knows there is even more glorious work to do and that it will require even greater sacrifice.

The Prophet Jeremiah tells us today that God's love for us is so great that of course our sins are forgiven. God speaks through the prophet, "I will be their God, and they will be my people." THIS is the wondrous love that we receive from God.

The Wondrous Love was manifested in the events that we will commemorate in the next two weeks. We shall recall Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. On Maundy Thursday, we shall recall the mandate of service to others that Jesus gave us as he washed the feet of the disciples at that meal. We shall recall the sacred meal that has become one of our two sacraments in Communion. Hopefully, all of us will spend some time in prayer and reflection on Good Friday, and maybe attend some sort of service at a neighboring church if that is what you feel called to do. And then, we wait in vigil, to commemorate. If you have an opportunity and about 2-3 hours on "Holy Saturday" evening, try attending an Easter Vigil service at a nearby church. If it is done correctly, it will bring you back to the first and second generations of the Church with its prayers and rituals.

All of this reaches its culmination on Easter Sunday. Remember, though, we cannot celebrate the Resurrection without going through the Passion of Christ. It is through all of this that we are witnesses to the Wondrous Love that is offered to us by God. Let us open our hearts to receive this Wondrous Love.