

This may not be a very Christian thing to say about this John 3:16 and the surrounding verses that make up our universal church fight song, so to speak, but I must let you know I do not have the fondest memory of that latter portion of the passage we heard this morning. It goes back to an Ash Wednesday service when I was in college. Now, even before starting my first day freshman year, I was told by plenty of family and other adults whose opinion I valued, to find groups on campus to join, to make it more than just about going to class, doing homework, with a few stops to the cafeteria, of course, in between. So, since I had been part of a church choir one way or another since elementary school, I figured I would check out the chapel choir on campus. It wasn't a large group. I didn't have to audition for it. It seemed like there were varying degrees of vocal talent: not too much pressure at all. Once a week, I would walk up the hill to the university chapel for a short rehearsal. Come Sunday morning, I would walk up that same hill, and we would sing in worship.

Except, as the weeks went by, I started to hear some rumors about our director, Dr. Donald Busarow, who, also, played the organ, directed the big-time choir on campus; evidently, was even responsible for several settings of the hymns in the beloved green *Lutheran Book of Worship* hymnal, not to

mention serving as a professor of various classes on campus. One of the rumors is that he made a student cry in his musical theory class. He took his work rather seriously. He, also, supposedly, referenced the devil quite often. When we had our larger worship services on campus and the processional cross was placed in a stand in the middle of the chancel area, there would always be at least one person whose clumsy feet would knock into that stand as they walked by, creating this horrendous screeching sound from the stone floor erupting throughout the entire sanctuary. He would always blame the devil for that agonizing noise. And then I came to learn that before he would come to our weekly chapel service on Sunday morning, he played the organ at a small Missouri Synod congregation beforehand; and yet, he never wavered from his immense dedication and relentless love for an ELCA university.

So, come that Ash Wednesday service, when we had quite a few more people in the sanctuary that night than what was usual for our Sunday morning miniscule crowd (for some reason, the Sabbath wasn't a high priority for the overwhelming majority of students on campus); our choral anthem that night was based on the latter portion of the Gospel we heard this morning. Unfortunately, let's just say I was distracted by the more-people-than-usual crowd, and so I was not paying as close of attention as I should have when we

got to the verse “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” At that point in the song, I came in singing too soon, as if I decided to start my own solo right there and then. As a result, Dr. Busarow unleashed a mighty glare that could penetrate the very core of the devil himself. I still remember those eyes many years later.

Nevertheless, oddly enough, in that moment there was this immense grace, because like any director or accompanist is trained to do: the song must go on. He kept on playing the piano. He kept on leading us in proclaiming the ultimate Good News that was encapsulated not in the beloved John 3:16, but in the concluding verse: “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.”

I’m sure Dr. Busarow was not the first or the last to unleash a death-glare in a sanctuary. It has been the common practice of church-goers since the beginning. The look that we received based on our clothing selection coming in Sunday morning. The stare parents noticed when their children were not near quiet enough. Or when the rumors of the previous week about one of the members were already full-fledged by the time the pastor started in with the announcements. The guilt we could and, still, can drastically unload on a person’s entire life just with our eyes.

However, if the 17th verse is any kind of portrayal on the eyes of our Savior: those eyes are more of comfort, more of compassion, more of believing in us, more of empowerment. They are the eyes that convince us that we can somehow be loved no matter what mistake we make, that we are somehow worth this whole journey to the cross that Jesus already took for us; that this Lent is not about a death-glare from God on sins previously committed. This is the season that declares to us in no uncertain terms, that God's love song for us is still on-going: it has never stopped for us, and even, for the whole world. And what is even more mind-boggling, even more grace-inspired, is that God believes *we* have a voice to offer to the divine composition; for God to be utterly convinced that we can make the song even more beautiful for the whole world to not only hear, but thoroughly enjoy. The song must go on, and God emphatically says we have been and always will be a most sacred part of its overwhelming beauty. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!