

Gospel & Sermon March 10, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Lent & Service of Healing and Prayer

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“God’s love heals us.”



Prayer for Healing: *Merciful God, constant source of all healing, we give you thanks for all your gifts of strength and life, and above all we thank you for the gift of your Son, through whom we have health and salvation. As we wait for that day when there will be no more pain, help us by your Holy Spirit to be assured of your power in our lives and to trust in your eternal love; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

Gospel: John 3:16-17

[Jesus said:] “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.”

First Reading: Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be

slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“God’s love heals us.”

A few years back, John 3:16 was everywhere: On signs in ballparks and stadiums, on quarterback Tim Tebow’s face, on plastic shopping bags from a clothing store and on cups and wrappers at a fast-food chain.

Maybe you can still see John 3:16 in some of those places. I’m not sure, and I don’t know that a Bucks game or a shopping trip counts as a legitimate sermon preparation expense.

Maybe you’re not even sure what John 3:16 refers to. Or maybe it’s a Bible verse you memorized back in Sunday school: “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.”

For some of us, those words are a comforting promise. But for others, this verse sounds a lot more like a threat: For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to let everyone know: You better believe in me - or else.

So if I ever hold up one of those Bible verse signs - and I probably won’t - or if I ever own a burger chain - and I probably won’t - but if either of those things ever happens there will be no reference to John 3:16 without John 3:17.

“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.”

You need both verses to even begin perceiving the depth of God's love - a love with the power to heal a broken world. A love that reminds us that God is for us and that nothing can separate us from God's love.

That's the kind of love that a follower of Jesus named Paul tells us about in that lesson we heard from the book of Romans. Here's a little different version of what Paul is saying:

“Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture. ... Absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love.”
(MSG)

When you need healing – or you are praying desperately for someone who needs healing - it can be hard to believe that. It can be hard to believe God is anywhere near us, let alone present and actively loving us.

And Paul acknowledges that: Hardships happen. Sickness happens. Natural and economic and personal disasters happen. Life is not always easy. But God loves us through all of it. And God loves us into eternity.

God's love goes on forever.

And God doesn't intend for us to just be passive recipients of that love.

God intends for that love to transform us. To transform us into people who seek more and more of God's presence. People who seek more and more of God's love. People who share more and more of God's love. That's what Jesus means when he talks about believing.

When Jesus talks about believing, he is not demanding that we agree with a certain set of statements about God or pray a special believer's prayer. Believing is not something that happens primarily in our brains. Believing happens in and through our bodies.

Believing is being in relationship with Jesus and inviting others to experience his life-giving presence. Believing is receiving God's love and sharing that love with our neighbors. Not by showing them Bible verses but by humbly serving them, in whatever ways we can.

That kind of love heals us and saves us, even in the midst of hardship and grief and pain. Maybe especially in the midst of hardship and grief and pain.

God wants each one of us - and the whole world - to experience that kind of love.

Because love is mostly what God does.

I'm stealing that line from Today show co-anchor Savannah Guthrie, who borrows it from a Bible translator named Eugene Peterson.

In her book "Mostly What God Does," Guthrie recalls times when it felt like mostly what God was doing was judging her.

"It took me a long time," she writes, "a lifetime of church and no church, faith and not much faith, seeking and failing, hoping and falling, to understand this basic precept: Mostly what God does is love us."

Mostly what God does is love us. God is not busy condemning us, or devising punishments that will scare us into faithfulness. I do imagine sometimes God looks upon us with a weary sigh. And sometimes the lack of love in our world brings painful consequences. But mostly what God does is love us. God loves us with a saving, healing love.

And then God invites us to live in that love, and share that love. Not by plastering Bible verses all over the place, but by actively loving and serving God and our neighbors.

By welcoming others, caring for others. By being present in the midst of suffering, even when we don't know what to say. By praying with and for one another, even when words fail. Sometimes, love is just showing up.

In Jesus, God shows up for each of us, and for all of us. In Jesus, God walks with us, suffers with us, and rejoices with us. Because God loves us. God loves you.

Pastor Jaime

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