

**+ John 3:14-21 + Rejoice in Christ's Love for You! + 4th Sunday in Lent + 22 March 2009 +**

In 1967, the Beatles first performed a song that has been ranked among the top pop songs of all time. The lyrics were simple and meant to convey a simple message—"All you need is love...love is all you need...Love, love, love..." They thought that if we all just had "love", then the world would become a better place. Strife and war would end and everyone would live in harmony. Over forty years later, we see that never happened. The love they sang about was shallow and fleeting—a harmony that could never exist.

There is so much more to love than what we hear about in pop culture. From our human point-of-view, it's rather difficult to truly define what love means. Ask a variety of people and you'll get a variety of answers. Some say it's the romantic feeling between a man and a woman, while others say it's the intimate bond of husband and wife or the close bond between parent and child. It's what you tell someone you really like. It's a feeling that makes you feel all "a-twitter". It's heartburn of the best kind. It's what makes you smile when you're tired. Nice definitions, but most are still just skin-deep.

So how do we learn what love really is? We won't find it in a Disney movie or a romance novel. We won't find it in the works of William Shakespeare or the music of the Beatles or the next American Idol. We can only learn the real meaning of love from the One who is "**love**"—the true God, Jesus Christ. He explains that meaning in breathtakingly simple words that cause you to **REJOICE IN CHRIST'S LOVE FOR YOU**, to rejoice in his self-sacrificing, soul-saving, life-changing love for you and your salvation.

When Jesus' ministry first started, few knew him or why he had come, but he became very popular very quickly. He had gathered a band of disciples. News about miracles he had performed fired the crowds. On a trip up to Jerusalem for the annual celebration of the Passover—the busiest time of the year, Jesus had cleansed the temple, because it had been turned into a mockery. Large crowds, then, began to follow him and hang on his every word, while the religious leaders viewed Jesus with hostility.

In spite of that opposition, a prominent Jewish leader named Nicodemus really wanted to find out what Jesus was all about. That desire was so strong that late one evening Nicodemus found himself knocking on Jesus' door. He had come in secret out of fear of the other religious leaders, but in spite of that fear, Nicodemus wanted to know if this Jesus was, indeed, God's Anointed One long promised in the Old Testament.

Jesus didn't disappoint him, but instead showed great love for this inquiring Pharisee even in the middle of the night. In the verses before our text, Jesus takes Nicodemus' focus from the here and now to the reason that Christ had come in the first place—to bring spiritual rebirth and eternal life to those who believe in him. In the process of explaining his purpose, Jesus also explained what had brought him there in the first place—God's love.

To put this heavenly truth of God's love into terms that Nicodemus would understand, Jesus used a familiar illustration from the Old Testament history of Israel. It wasn't one of the high points in their history with God. Even though God had delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, they repeatedly rejected his promises and spoke against God. On one occasion, God allowed poisonous snakes to come into the camp and bite the Israelites. As they were dying, they pleaded to Moses, their leader, to seek the Lord's help. In undeserved love and mercy, God provided a way. He had Moses build a brass snake and place it on top of a pole for all to see. Those who looked at the snake would be reminded of their sin and the punishment they deserved. They would repent of their sin and follow God's command to look once more at the brass snake and live, which they did.

Jesus explained, "**Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up...For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...**" Already in these early days of his ministry, Jesus was looking ahead to his crucifixion. He knew he had to "**be lifted up**" on a cross if he was to rescue sinful mankind from eternal death. He knew he had to become an object like that brass snake that was awful to see, because he would suffer what we deserve for our sins and be a reminder of the magnitude of our guilt. Why would Jesus, the holy and innocent Son of God, allow himself to endure all that? What was it that compelled him to continue on that path to the cross for three more long years? It was the self-sacrificing love of God.

It was that boundless, amazing, unfathomable, incredible, undeserved love of God that moved him to deliver the wicked Israelites in the wilderness. It wasn't their pleasant personalities or their kind gestures or their outward acts of worship. It was his love. Look around you and look within you and you will see nothing that is good or attractive or deserving before God. The only thing we all deserve is God's holy punishment, yet our heavenly Father was willing to give up for us what he treasured most—his one and only, his only begotten Son. It was the same boundless, amazing, unfathomable, incredible, undeserved love of God for this world of people he had created, even for you and me, that moved him to make that ultimate sacrifice.

Unlike our love, that is often so self-centered or self-seeking always wondering "What's in it for me?", Christ's love was totally focused on us and our salvation. Christ was willing to give up everything for us who deserved it not. This

love was more than just emotion. It was perfect love that acted on our behalf—a love that was not only self-sacrificing, but soul-saving.

You see, Jesus explains why ***“the Son of Man must be lifted up”*** – ***“...that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”*** Like those Israelites who looked to the hideous object of the brass snake to live as God had promised, Christ directs our eyes to himself on the cross so we might see the depth of God’s love for us in his sacrifice and therefore live eternally. Looking to Christ is the only sure way for our souls to escape eternal death.

...But how can we look to Christ Crucified and be saved? We go back to God’s love. ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”***

Did you notice it? In just a few verses, Jesus repeats an invitation to you and me to enjoy his amazing love. He’s very clear about his desire that we believe in him and live. He says, “Don’t you see it? It’s right here. The eternal deliverance I am accomplishing is right here before your eyes and it’s for all, even for you! Yes, ***‘whoever’*** includes you! Without my self-sacrificing, soul-saving love, you will endure God’s holy condemnation and you will perish! See my love! Know my love for you! Trust in me! I am your only Savior!”

Through that Good News of God’s soul-saving love, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit so we can believe in him. Perhaps he did that for you when you were brought to the waters of Holy Baptism, where his forgiveness and life were poured out on you through water and the Word. Perhaps it was through the hearing of that message of God’s soul-saving love from a pastor or a parent or someone else you know and love. Whatever the case, Christ’s love moved him to make us his own through faith in him. Now heaven is ours because of that soul-saving love, a love which is also a life-changing love.

Jesus explains to Nicodemus and to us, ***“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”***

With the pictures of light and darkness, Jesus describes the effect that God’s love has on a believer. You see, as we heard St. Paul remind us in the Second Lesson, ***“by nature, we were objects of wrath...”*** By nature, we prefer the darkness of sin. It’s so much easier to give in to the temptations that our sinful natures, the sinful world or Satan himself put in front of us. If we remain in the darkness of sin, we think we can hide our sins, but our holy God sees every selfish thought, every hurtful word, every loveless action. He even sees our secret sins that no one else knows about. By nature, we don’t want God to reveal our evil deeds, but want to continue savoring them in the darkness. Our selfish sinful natures want nothing more than to keep on flaunting God’s holy Law and say or do whatever we want, even though such an attitude will only lead to the eternal darkness of hell.

Look to the hideous sight of Christ on the cross again. Again we are reminded of the suffering and death we deserve. Again we are reminded how the guilt of every one of our sins put him on that cross...and that crushes our sinful pride. That humbles our sinful attitudes. That silences our sinful selves, but the longer we look at Christ Crucified, the more we realize the sight isn’t so hideous or awful, but beautiful and breathtaking.

The sight of Christ on the cross changes our lives forever by giving us a new life. St. Paul put it best in 2 Corinthians 5, ***“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”*** That sight of Christ Crucified brings comfort, peace, hope, purpose, and above all, joy to our lives. You see, in Christ, we are new creations. By faith, we now flee the darkness and rejoice to live in the light of God’s love. By faith, we now recognize that God’s will is best even when it hurts. Christ’s self-sacrificing, soul-saving love changes our outlook, our worldview completely.

The Beatles really didn’t understand what they were singing when they sang, “All you need is love...” For Christians, though, all we need is Christ’s love for us. In these last weeks of Lent, marvel at how that love took Jesus through suffering and hell to Calvary and the empty tomb, and rejoice because Christ endured and accomplished all that for you! Amen.