

**Numbers 21:4-9 + Turn to the Lord Who Loves Sinners + Series: Turn to the Lord  
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 4th Sunday in Lent + 11 March 2018**

How do you love the unlovable? Sometimes you and I encounter people in our lives who seem “unlovable.” Maybe someone wrongs you seriously—maybe they ruin your reputation or hurt you deeply—and you can’t even be in the same room with them. They’ve wronged you or someone you love and you just can’t stand them.

Maybe someone who was close to you at one point never seems to learn from their mistakes. Trouble always seems to find them and trouble always seems to be in their wake. They keep falling back into the same sins, the same problems, the same troubles, the same unhealthy issues again and again. For your own sake, you have to walk away from them or it could harm you. You’d rather be done with them and all the trouble they’ve caused.

How can you love people like that? How can you care for people who have wronged you or sinned against you? Why would you love someone like that? Common wisdom tells you that the best thing you can do is get them out of your life or you get out of theirs. Loving the “unlovable” rarely, if ever, comes naturally to any of us, so you can understand why we’d rather abandon them and move on. Why waste your time on someone so unlovable?

Now you and I wouldn’t ever think that God wastes his time. Yet based on what we just talked about, you might think the Lord was wasting his time on a group of people who again and again practically made themselves unlovable. You might think that God was wasting his time until you take a closer look.

We find God’s people, the Israelites, making a long, hot, thankless detour around hostile territory. After nearly forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites were finally on their way back to the Promised Land, but their cousins, the Edomites, refused to let them pass through on the shortest route to Canaan. They would have to travel longer and farther. So the people started looking for someone to blame. Soon their blame turned towards God.

Now nearly forty years before, God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. The Lord had brought the Egyptian Pharaoh and his kingdom to their knees with a series of ten miraculous plagues. The Lord set his people free after nearly 400 years of slavery. When Pharaoh changed his mind, God miraculously parted the Red Sea so the people could cross safely to the other side while God dumped the waters of the Red Sea on Pharaoh’s army. God’s prophet Moses led the people to the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive God’s holy Law for his people, because the Lord loved his people

Yet while Moses was away receiving that holy Law from God, the people formed a golden calf idol and began worshiping it as a god. They were punished for their actions, and yet the Lord still loved them. Then Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan to check out the cities, the people, and the land. God had promised to give that land to the Israelites, but when the spies came back ten of them filled the people with fear and turned them against Moses and the high priest Aaron. They even threatened to stone Moses and Aaron, but the Lord stopped them and consequences came. No one over the age of 20 would enter the Promised Land except the two spies who remained faithful to the Lord—Joshua and Caleb. Later even Moses and Aaron disqualified themselves from entrance into the Promised Land. Amazingly, through it all, the Lord still loved them.

Years passed. That generation died off in the wilderness. The time had come for the Israelites to finally make their way again to the Promised Land, but the Edomites refused to let them pass. So the Lord guided Israel all the way around Edom. They had to go back for a time towards the Red Sea in the south—the very same sea they had crossed years before. The way was long, hot, and thankless. Yet along the way, the Lord continued to provide for his people as he always had. He provided them with sweet, sustaining food, quail for meat, and miraculous sources of cool, flowing water. The Lord even gave them military victories over hostile Canaanite kings. The Lord still loved them.

...But do you know what happens when 2,000,000 people get hot, tired, and sick of eating the same food every day for years? When it seems like they’ve only been wandering in the wilderness never to arrive at their destination? They get tired, frustrated, and impatient. Their impatience and frustration grew into rebellion and anger against God for making their lives difficult. They wanted someone to blame for their troubles and how quickly they acted like their parents. **“Why have you led us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread or water, and we detest this wretched food!”** They lost their tempers with the Lord because his blessings and his care and his grace didn’t measure up to their expectations.

Now after forty years of complaining and rejection and falling back into the same foolish sins, why didn’t God just give up on the Israelites? Why didn’t God just walk away from those unlovable, ungrateful people? Why did he waste his time with them? The Lord still loved them, but he also knew they needed to be disciplined in that region

infested with deadly snakes. You see, the entire time the Lord had kept those snakes away until he briefly removed his hand of protection allowing the snakes to slither into the camp.

***“Many Israelites died”*** in their rebellion against God. There was death everywhere, but unlike their parents, these Israelites recognized how foolish, how ungrateful, how unlovable they had been. They recognized that without the Lord’s help, they would never survive. So they pleaded with Moses for relief. ***“We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD so that he will take the snakes away from us.”***

Once more, Moses stepped into the breach between the holy God and those unlovable sinners. Once more, he served as their mediator praying on their behalf, and once more, the Lord relented. Yet the Lord had a rather strange solution for saving his people. In answer to Moses’ prayer, the Lord had Moses make a snake out of bronze and ***“mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.”*** He will live. So Moses made that snake ***“and mounted it on a pole,”*** as the Lord instructed. The Lord healed his people and protected them from the snakes, because he still loved them.

Why does God love us? Should God love us? Is there anything about any of us that is “lovable” in God’s sight? You might think that you’re not unlovable. I know I’m tempted to think that way about myself, but take a closer look. Have there been times when even though the Lord provided everything for you, you still thought you knew better than God? Have you ever thought more highly of yourself than God or perhaps that God wasn’t meeting your expectations? Have you ever been blind to the many gifts that God gives or failed to take them seriously or took them for granted? Have you ever been ungrateful for what the Lord of grace has given you and complained against him? Have you ever preferred to rely on yourself? Have you ever rebelled against God?

Or look at it this way. What list of charges against his holy Law could God present against those of you who are parents? Have you always gratefully and joyfully loved your kids and treated them as gifts from God? Or how about those of you who are married? Have you always gratefully and joyfully loved your spouse as God’s gift to you? How about those of you who are single or those of you who are employed or retired or those of you who are neighbors or friends or members of this congregation? How often don’t we take God’s gracious gifts for granted and expect God to measure up to our expectations?

God has every right to withhold his blessings and grace from us. He has every right to allow trouble or pain or danger or death into our ungrateful lives. If we’re honest with ourselves, there is no reason God should love us. We have sinned against God, and we all deserve his punishment. So what can we do? Where can we turn? Who will intercede for us? Who will be our Mediator? Who will be God’s solution?

Fourteen hundred years after all this, Jesus stepped into the breach as God’s long-promised Holy One. He came to be God’s solution for you and me. In jaw-dropping, undeserved love, God sent his Son to do what we could not. From conception on, he lived perfectly. He never complained. He never harbored bitter feelings against God. He never thought he knew better than God. He never thought more of himself than anyone else. He came to be God’s solution as Jesus himself explained, ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 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.”*** (John 3:14-17)

Jesus is God’s solution to the sting of your regret, to the pain of your guilt, to the spiritual poison of your sin. Like those ancient Israelites bitten by the snakes, look not to yourself for healing, but to Jesus! The Lord wants you to look in faith to Jesus lifted up on a cross of wood to save you from all your sins. Look to Jesus and see God’s love for the unlovable, even for you and me. Look to Jesus trusting that God has the power to fulfill his promise to forgive your sin, to heal your pain, to give you life forever. Look to Jesus and see how much the Lord of grace loves sinners, how much the Lord loves you in spite of your complaints, your short temper with God, your foolish expectations, and even your rejection. The Lord still loves you! Look and live!

So we turn to the Lord who loves us even when we are unlovable. That impacts how we look at others, even when they seem unlovable. We can love our kids, our spouses, our co-workers, our neighbors, our friends when they seem unlovable because God loves each of us, unlovable sinners, in Christ. We can love and we will love because God first loved us. Praise God for his faithful love that sacrificed his one and only Son for us! Praise God for his longsuffering compassion towards us! Praise our Savior-God for stepping into the breach and becoming our solution and salvation! Praise God who alone can heal the deadly bite of that old serpent Satan

and who alone turns us to the Savior who loves and gave himself for us! Praise the Lord who loves sinners!  
Amen.