

Homily – For God So Loved the World

Rob Keim

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The World Council of Churches or WCC was established in 1948 as a worldwide Christian church organization. It currently represents more than 500 million people in 110 countries. The World Council of Churches includes our Anglican Communion of which the Episcopal Church is a part. The goal of the WCC is to be a fellowship which seeks unity, a common witness and Christian service. In this way the WCC facilitates ecumenicism. I have to say I think this bridgebuilding is a noble goal but we often fall short. Instead, as followers of Jesus we far too often highlight those things that divide us. Those things that make us unique. Those things that make us feel better than those other Christians. So today, I want use our Gospel reading to see how God's love is already connecting us in love to one another.

Today's reading from the Gospel according to John is one of the best known in the whole Bible. Some even say it is the core of their spirituality. In John 3:16 we have "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." That should make you smile. "For God so love the world..." That is a beautiful thing. For many this is a reminder that God is love. God is the source of all love. God's love is boundless and unchanging. God's love is for all people, all things, all of creation. And as I have said before, there is nothing we can do to increase God's love for us, and there is nothing we can do to decrease God's love for us. God's love flows, and flows, and flows. As Christians we believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, these are the pinnacle and the crossroads of that love. It was for the love of all created beings that God the Father sent his Son into the world that we might learn of God's love for us, and that he might show us how to live "The Way of Love." And, we respond to God's love by loving God back, by loving others, and by loving ourselves. This all feels familiar doesn't it? Love of God, others, and self lies at the core of every spiritual journey. Love not only permeates those journeys, it transcends them and binds them together. Divine love embraces everyone and everything. There is nothing outside the divine embrace of God's love. That should make us all smile.

However as humans, we have layered some stuff onto God's love that is a stumbling block. We have tried to show that God's love is somehow limited. We have tried to claim that God's love is only for those who are like us – look like us, think like us, live like us, believe like us. In this way we have created a false god that has nothing to do with Jesus and his "Way of Love," but John 3:16 reminds us Jesus has come with love, and through love, and by love to reclaim the entire world for God.

Now, to help us reclaim the love of God, we should remember the way that the word “world” is used throughout the Gospel of John. “For God so love the world.” For John “world” does not mean nature or creation. Instead he means “the system”—as human beings have construct it. The world is a human system based on the false gods of security, status, pleasure, and power. It is the idols that we use to support the false self. It is the things of this world that lead us away from God rather than towards God.

This is why so many of our saints speak about “leaving the world”. And other saints say that we have to learn to be “in the world but not of the world.” We must see things for what they are and also for what they aren’t. For this reason, unless we in some way “leave the world,” I think we can safely assume we are utterly beholdng to it. Are you willing to do your part to reclaim the world for God?

For me part of the genius of the Gospel is that we do not need to move mountains to make the world a better place. The ways of this world tell us we must have more control, more will, or more of everything in order to fix the world. The ways of love tells us that we must abide in the love of God and reflect that love back out into the world. Our work is to be loved. We are to accept that we are the beloved of God. We are to trust that we are worthy of that love. We are to believe that all others are also worthy of God’s love. Again, Jesus is a genius. He uses love to reclaim the world and all our human systems. He doesn’t just claim the good stuff. He claims it all. In John 3:17 it is written “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” God is calling everyone and everything to God’s self, not just a few. Do you hear the call in your own life?

As an illustration of the work of love that is set before us, let me share a story as told by James Finley, a spiritual writer, and clinical psychologist. These are his words. “Imagine that you have a dream in which you are climbing a high mountain. The valley below is where you grew up, where you experienced pain and made many mistakes. You are trying to transcend and leave this place by reaching the summit, on which you will be sublimely holy and one with God. After all our goal is to live into our oneness with God.

As the summit comes into view, the wind rising from the valley brings with it the sound of a child crying out in distress. You realize that there is no real choice but to go down the mountain to find and help the hurting child. Turning back, you descend into the valley. Following the child’s cries, you arrive at the very home you tried to leave behind.

You gently open the door and look inside. Sitting in the corner on the floor is your own wounded child-self, that part of you that holds feelings of powerlessness and

shame. You sit down next to the child-self on the floor. For a long time you say nothing. Then a most amazing thing happens. As you are putting your arms around this child, you suddenly realize you are on the lofty summit of union with God! This is the miracle of God's love of the world. We don't have to leave to go on a fearless pilgrimage to the top of the world to earn God's love. We already have it. We are already loved by God. This is the work of Jesus. He converts the ordinary. James Finley concludes this part of his story by saying, it is in the ordinariness of our lives that we encounter God and become transformed.

Now, to be transformed in compassionate love does not mean that you do not have to continue struggling and working through your shortcomings and difficulties. It means learning to join God who loves you through and through in the midst of all your shortcomings. As you continue to be transformed in this way, you come to realize that right here, right now, just the way you are, you are at oneness with a God who loves you and takes you just the way you are.

Using the words of James Finley again as he continues his story... "Immersed in love, you look out through compassionate eyes to see the world. Here the dream in which you return to your wounded child-self takes on new, social dimensions. In this expanded version of the dream, you follow the child's cries to the home in which you grew up. You go inside to compassionately embrace the preciousness of the hurting child. As you are putting your arms around the child, it turns into your mother, your father, brother, sister. This second child is every nameless face you have passed in the street. It turns into the world that "God so loved, that he gave his only Son..."

God loves and is one with all that is lost and broken in everyone. So in the dream, you begin to realize that you are also falling in love with each and every person in the world. However as you go on in this love for others, you fail again and again. This is no obstacle so long as you see your failure to be compassionate as just another opportunity to renew your faith in God's compassionate love for you and for all of us in the midst of our crooked journeys."

All we need to do is abide in that love. We don't make the love happen. We just accept it. Stay there with that love, and as you abide it will change the world. So, set off on the interior journey to know you are loved. At times the journey will get interrupted by the crying child and there will be disappointment. But in the end there is realization that I am already loved. That is the work set before us by Jesus, and not the other grand stuff alone on the mountain top.

Now let me get back to the World Council of Churches before I conclude. In 2022 the World Council of Church's created a unity statement entitled, "Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity," This unity statement is a theological resource

to combat “the many sins of profound injustice, such as casteism, racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, colonialism, economic exploitation, the unequal distribution of power and resources, and the corruption of our relationships with creation, alongside so many kinds of alienation.” In June I will be a deputy from our diocese to the Episcopal Church’s General Convention. General Convention is held every three years and this time it will be in Louisville, Kentucky. As bridgebuilders and those who claim the via media or middle way, I look forward to the adoption of the WCC unity statement by our Episcopal Church. In this way we can stop claiming that only some are the beloved of God. God’s love is for all. “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.”