

John 3:1-17

Which day of the year best expresses love? Most people would probably say Valentine's Day. And considering the fact that three billion valentines were sent out last month, they may be right. I suppose it would have been appropriate to have had today's text before us three weeks ago on Valentine's Day weekend. I've heard it said that John 3:16 is God's Valentine's Day card to us. But if it is, this Scripture verse is a strange valentine indeed. I'm fairly certain that Hallmark does not have a card that reads, "I loved you." They're never in the past tense but always, "I love you," in the present tense. Yet, John 3:16 is not present, but past tense. "*God so loved the world.*"

God's love is not a sentimental feeling as we humans are known for. Love in the present can become apathy or hate in the future. That's why John 3:16 is so comforting. Because God loved, He acted. Once and for all. And nothing in the future can change that. Long before there ever was a Valentine's Day, He gave His only Son so that the world might be saved through Him.

In reading Scripture, it is always vitally important that we pay attention to the verbs. In John 3:16 there are three action verbs. The first is "loved." God loved. He loved the world. Now this right here is a pretty incredible thing. Have you paid attention lately to how awful this world is behaving? It's a cesspool! And not just them out there; us, too, in here. But it's always been this way since sin entered in.

How can God have loved a world like this? That's not how love works in our estimation. Who sends a valentine to a horrible person? Be mine! God does. God loved us, says the apostle, while we were yet sinners. God loves not because of us, but in spite of us. While we were rejecting Him, He loved us. While we were hating Him, He loved us.

But that's not how we think. We think that God loves us because we're just so downright lovable. We think there is something about us that prompts God's love. No! cries the apostle. He loved us when we were His enemies! And you know something? Our Old Adam still hates God. It despises Him and sees Him as an enemy.

But that's why this past tense verb, "*God loved,*" is so good for us to hear. However poorly you and I have acted toward God, we can never turn His love into hate. Because it's past tense! It was always there and will never be changed. He loved. He loved the world. And so He loved you.

And because God loved, He gave. This is the second verb, also past tense. He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, for you. On Valentine's Day, people give gifts to their sweethearts. This hardly describes our relationship with God. He gave the greatest gift of all to His enemies; to us. God gave His Son to suffer and die on the cross for all the wretched sinners in the world. He sent Jesus to endure the hell we deserve. And not because we were His sweethearts. Not because He saw potential in us. "*Christ died for the ungodly,*" says the apostle.

Such good news this is for us! There is nothing we have done that is so ungodly and wicked that God takes it all back. It's done. Past tense. Our behavior can never change the truth that God loved us and gave Jesus for us.

Do you believe this? Believe is the third verb in John 3:16. "*Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.*" Most people mess up here. They allow God to have the first two verbs, but they, maybe we too, want control of the third one. God loved, and God gave, but I believe. And yes, this is true. God doesn't believe; we believe.

But the way we can mess this up is with the thinking, "God did His part, now I have to do mine." As if faith is our part of the bargain. As if eternal life is two-thirds God and one-third me. It's up to me to believe.

But friends, faith is not for us to muster. Faith is a gift. The apostle is quite clear on this in Ephesians 2. We cannot give God's gifts to ourselves. God alone gives His gifts. We can reject Jesus, but we have no power to believe in Him.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is your Savior from sin, death, and hell? This is the work of God in you. He worked this faith in you in Holy Baptism. If God can give the gift of life to a baby, why can't He give the gift of eternal life? He can and He does. He gives this gift freely to all who believe.

Did Nicodemus believe? He's the Pharisee Jesus is speaking with in our text. Jesus tells him, "*I have told you earthly things and you do not believe. How can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*" Nicodemus' mind was getting in the way. "*How...*" he keeps asking Jesus. He wants to understand in order to believe. But that's not faith. Does a tiny baby, baptized into Christ, understand anything? Of course not. Yet Jesus says in Matthew 18, they "*believe in Me.*"

I think I act too much like Nicodemus. Maybe you do too. I try to grasp how God could love someone like me. I try to understand why He would bring me to faith in Jesus, and not someone else. Why can He keep forgiving me for doing the same wretched sins again and again?

But that's not for me or you to figure out. It's simply for us to believe. There is a heaven and there is a hell. And God wants you in heaven with Him. He sent Jesus Christ to make this happen. He gave you faith in your baptism. He keeps you in the faith through His Word and Sacrament. And He daily and richly forgives your sins. Not one of you has done something so ungodly that you're disqualified. God forgives you. He forgives every sin you have done. Don't question why...how. Believe. Amen.