

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
March 11, 2018

Love Embraces All

1. Love embraces me.
2. Love embraces you.
3. Love embraces the world.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴ "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that **everyone** who believes may have eternal life in him."

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the **world** through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

What are the most important words in John 3:14-17? "Love" certainly jumps out. "Save" too! I don't want to diminish the importance of those words, but here are the words that I love in this lesson: everyone, world, whoever.

I love these words because as a pastor, I announce God's love to others. But there is a significant part of my life that looks like this. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." The blood of Jesus covers us all... except me. I'm the exception to the rule.

Now why would I, as a pastor, ever feel that way?

Well, look at what Jesus says, "Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed."

I know that there are lots of things I have done and said and thought in my life that I am not about to bring to the light this morning. I'm too embarrassed. It doesn't take too long to think about this past week and admit... "I'm not going to tell you what I felt about..."

In fact, let's just read this section from our hymnal about preparation for communion. What deeds of darkness does this review bring to light for you?

I should examine myself according to the Ten Commandments and ask how well I have carried out my responsibilities as a husband or wife or single person, as a

parent or child, an employer or employee, a teacher or student. Have I loved God with all my heart, gladly heard his Word, and patiently endured affliction? Have I been disobedient, proud or unforgiving? Have I been selfish, lazy, envious, or quarrelsome? Have I lied or deceived, taken something not mine, or given anyone a bad name? Have I abused my body or permitted indecent thoughts to linger in my mind? Have I failed to do what is right and good? (*Christian Worship*, page 156, “Personal Preparation for Holy Communion”)

Isn't the answer always, “Yes, yes, yes. I am guilty of these deeds of darkness”?

Now let's go back to John 3:14-21 and the words that are most important to me: everyone, world, whoever.

1. Love Embraces Me

These words destroy Satan's lie that says, “God's love is for everyone else, but he can't love you because of the darkness in your heart.” God loved the world. That includes someone like me who spends so much time in spiritually and emotionally dark places. Everyone who believes has eternal life. Whoever believes in him is not condemned.

Ok, I'll admit that some of the darkness in my heart are the doubts and questions about God. Do I believe? My faith is so weak. But Jesus came in fulfillment of Isaiah's words, “A smoldering wick he will not put out.” Jesus heard the prayer of a man filled with doubts, “Lord, I believe. Help me overcome my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

World. Everyone. Whoever. That includes me.

The truth is that Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save the world. So then he didn't come into the world with the goal and desire to condemn me, but to save me.

So I step into the light... not because I have no darkness to confess. But because I know that there is forgiveness for everything that I have done. I'm like that thief on the cross, who in his spiritual darkness committed crimes worthy of death, and even ridiculed Jesus at the beginning of the crucifixion. But Jesus came not to condemn that thief but to save him. “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Step with me into the light... how fitting that we have new light here in the sanctuary today! Step with me into the light. We don't have to hide the darkness, for God's love is all-embracing, embracing even me.

Now why have I spent so much talking about “me,” making sure that each of us claims God's all-embracing love for ourselves? Because we are like a pipeline that God wants to use to bring his all-embracing love to others. If we aren't certain of his love, that love can't flow through us

to others. So let's claim again the power of these words: world, everyone, whoever. Jesus came into the world to save every one of us, whoever believes in him.

2. Love Embraces You

Now here is a tough question for each of us to ask: "Why have I come into Love's embrace?" Am I here in Love's embrace to condemn you and you and you? Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, but to save the world. So too, let each of us say, "I have come into Love's embrace, not to condemn you but to save you."

Now who is that "you" of which I'm speaking? God loved the world. It is relatively easy to say, "I love the world too." After all, I can go to a baseball game and see 40,000 people and think: God loves these people and sent his Son for them, and I love them too. That is easy because I don't know those 40,000. I don't have to put up with their deeds of darkness. I don't have to put up with their selfishness. I don't have to put up with their anger. I don't have to put up with their sarcasm or their thoughtlessness.

But who is that "you" that you rub elbows with on a daily basis? Your spouse? Your significant other? Your roommate? Your children? Your parents? They may have a hard time seeing their "deeds of darkness," but they are painfully evident to you.

But why did Jesus embrace you in his saving love? To condemn those around you? Or to save them? The answer is obvious, but incredibly difficult to live out!

The more we try to love the unlovable around us, the more we will fail. And they will know it too!

What better way to let others see the all-embracing love of Jesus than by stepping out of the darkness and into the light? Let's be honest. The people around us know our hypocrisy. Rather than try to hide it in the dark, let's be honest and when we see we have been unloving, to freely confess it, to step out into the light.

So parents, when we get angry and say something we should not have said to our children, let's step into the light and let our darkness be exposed. Let's admit our sin and confess our confidence that the "everyone" and "world" of John 3:14-21 applies to me. We are helping our children understand they can step into the light of God and admit to him their darkness and be forgiven.

Let's admit the darkness in our hearts that may show itself in a short temper at work. Let's apologize to those we have sinned against, confident that even if they don't forgive us, our God does because we are part of the world whom he loves. It is in that honesty that others who are burdened by that idea, "I'll never be good enough," can find hope to be wrapped up in the all-embracing love of the Savior.

3. Love Embraces the World

Jesus' words ring true in our society, don't they?

¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

It is easy for us to look at the world around us and be filled with disgust. People today are boasting about deeds of darkness that in generations past would have been hidden. The "Harvey Weinstein" comments on the Oscars, the multitudes of women who say, "Me too" in connection with sexual harassment. Foul language. Disrespect. The list could be endless.

But why did you and I come into Love's embrace? Not to condemn the world but to save the world! We are Christ's body today to bring his saving love to the world around us.

So rather than look at the world in disgust, let's see instead a vast mission field before us. We are here so that God can work through us to embrace the world his love.

So I would ask you, "What is your dream to embrace the world with God's all-embracing love?" What can you do? Are you on the frontlines? Are you working with "the world" at your workplace? Do you think of it this way, "I am at this job, not to condemn the 'world' around me but to save the 'world' around me"? If you were always thinking in this way, how would you act differently?

Yes, this kind of thinking will reveal more "deeds of darkness" in our lives. That's why I encourage you to go back and claim again the beauty of those words: Everyone, world, whoever. The Savior's forgiving love embraces you!

Which leads us all the more to ask, "What can I do to save the world around me?" How can I show love to my coworkers, my family, my friends, so that they ask for the reason for the hope that I have?

You may no longer be on the "frontlines." At a conference this past week I heard a pastor talk about how he uses his talents as an international hip-hop artist to reach an urban culture in Fort Lauderdale. It reminded me that there are so many people I will never be able to reach personally. But I do see that God can use me to be an enabler, to use the resources that God has given me personally and as part of an incredible out-reach loving congregation to help others carry out ministry.

So I would encourage you to dream. Has God given you resources to help others reach the world around them?

At the Wednesday Lenten service, I heard again the Passion history. I heard what was happening to Jesus in Caiaphas' palace... spit on, beaten. I thought about the fact that Jesus knew in

advance that this is what all-embracing love would require. He knew it would require sacrifice, but he was willing to do that for me, for you, for the world.

It made me wonder, “Lord, how am I to embrace the world in love? What sacrifices are you calling me to make?”

Can I sacrifice more in my offerings? Can I give my time better?

Recognize that we can’t all make the same sacrifice. I’m reminded of that as I pray for our mission partners.

I’ve been praying for Dan Thiel in Costa Maya, Mexico. I stand in awe of the sacrifice that he and his wife Cindy are making so that God’s all-embracing love is proclaimed there.

I’ve been praying for Pastor Jeremy Mattek. He has served for many years at our sister congregation Garden Homes. It is a difficult cross-cultural ministry. He has a call to go elsewhere. I’m not sure that I would have the strength that he has shown to serve in his setting. Could I make that sacrifice?

I’ve been praying for Pastor John Holtz. He has served as our Mission Partner in Malawi, Africa for many years. Now he has the call to serve in India, a culture that in many ways is even more difficult for a Westerner to adjust to. Would I have the ability to serve in that way?

My point is simply this. God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world but to save the world through him. God has brought us into his loving embrace, not to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Each of us has the same call, but each of us is gifted differently to fulfill the call. My question is... considering your abilities and your resources, considering your place in life, how does God want you to sacrifice yourself to share the all-embracing love in Christ?

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My Next Steps in God’s Plan of All-Embracing Love

Look inside: Read the book of James (a chapter a day) to let God’s Word convict you of the darkness within your own heart. After your time of confession, experience Love’s embrace by reciting Jesus’ words: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Look outside: Who is close to you whom you struggle to love? How might you show the Savior’s all-embracing love to that individual?

Look up: Ask the Lord Jesus to give you a clear vision of your role in making known to the world the Savior’s all-embracing love. What dreams has he put on your heart? What sacrifice is he calling you to make?