

Sermon Lent IV March 10 2024

How much does God love us? Sometimes we might wonder, when we're upset that we didn't get something we asked for or when we feel particularly spiritually dry.

This Gospel today addresses that question, and it also prompts us to hold in our hearts the question "How much do we love this God who loves us?"

Decades ago, a black woman named Mary McLeod Bethune who grew up in the Jim Crow South somehow found a path to being a teacher, an advocate, and an advisor to presidents. As a young woman, she read John, Chapter 3, verse 16 in the beautifully poetic King James Version, which reads *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

One word struck her: "whosoever."

Here's what she said about that: *With these words [John 3:16] the scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. "Whosoever," it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just "whosoever." It means that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day.¹*

"Whosoever." Anybody at all. A promise of eternal life for anybody and everybody who believes. No refusal of the promise if you're black or white or brown. No refusal of the promise if you don't speak eloquently. No refusal of the promise if you're married, divorced or single. No refusal of the promise if you're gay or straight. No refusal of the promise if you're rich or if you're poor. No refusal of the promise if you're a Republican or a Democrat or an independent or a Green Party member or even an anarchist. No refusal if you're a sinner or a saint.

Just no refusal. Full Stop.

We are all offered the promise of eternal life if we believe, whosoever we are.

Let's stop a minute and consider the context of Jesus saying these words. This is in the midst of a visit. Nicodemus, a teacher in the Temple, comes to ask questions of Jesus. He comes at night so that no one will see that he's talking to Jesus, because not everyone likes what Jesus is saying. But Nicodemus is intrigued. He starts out with a rather fawning statement: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God because no one can do these signs, these miracles, apart from the presence of God." Jesus doesn't seem to be impressed and starts talking about being born from above, and Nicodemus, being a literal sort of fellow, gets hung up on that. Jesus clarifies it for him, and then suddenly it pivots in verse 11, when Jesus says "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony."

Something is happening here, because if you read these words in the Greek, you'd know that if Jesus were a Southerner, we'd hear "yet y'all" instead of "yet you." Suddenly he's talking to the whole of the synagogue, the whole of the Jewish people, not just this one guy, Nicodemus.

He's telling all the people from the Chief Priest down to the ordinary person attending worship that they haven't been paying attention...and then he delivers the thing that should blow them away: John 3.16. This message that confirms that Jesus has been sent from God to shine a light on the love that God has for us. All. Of. Us. Nicodemus had been focused on the wrong thing, just like last week, when Jesus told the leaders in the Temple that they were focused on making sure folks had the right kind of doves and the right kind of money when the truth of relationship with our Heavenly Father is mutual love. It's the same message we wrestle with today.

My husband was raised and ordained in a different denomination than I. We agree on most things, but there are some things that we disagree on. That doesn't mean I think that he won't get to heaven, because it's not my job to judge who gets eternal life. That's God's call, and he's promised if we believe in him, we get it.

You may have friends or family members who have different beliefs on one topic or another. Oftentimes we might get into arguments about who is right and who is wrong, and we are pointing at the wrong thing. If being an Episcopalian has brought you to a closer understanding of the love of God, that's what it's there for. It worked for me. If being a Presbyterian has brought you to a closer understanding of the love of God, good for you. If being a Quaker works better for you, great.

But the heart of the matter is that whatever path you are taking to a deeper understanding of the love of God is the right path, and it doesn't help matters when we say another person's path to God is wrong. That's between them and God. It also doesn't help matters if we say that only x kind of people receive that loving promise. If only straight people do. If only people who belong to our denomination do. If only people who have married and have a couple of kids do. If only...

...people like us do.

That's what Mary McLeod Bethune was so joyfully comforted by...the whosoever of the promise. She wasn't excluded, even though she lived in a society that didn't think she was equal.

In this Gospel, we are given the most beautiful of gifts, the promise of eternal life. We don't have to earn it, we simply have to believe. It's a gift of grace from the one who created us and loves us beyond all imagining.

And yet, sometimes, we are tempted to be judge and jury to say who gets the promise and who doesn't. Maybe we like to think we belong to an exclusive club of some sort and not everyone belongs. Maybe we

think we probably shouldn't get the gift but if we say it often enough it will happen.

Can we not just stop a moment and release our need to control the narrative and just bask in the love of God? Can we not just accept that it is not our task to sort wheat from chaff?

Can we look at each person we encounter, whether their someone whom we would meet at the Country Club or at the Hope Center, in the ER or at the Food Lion, and think "how wonderful that this person and I are all promised the gift?"

Here's the thing about God's love: it's not pie. We don't run out of slices. There's always enough pie for everyone. There's always enough love for everyone. Let's treat each other as though we really believe that, and thank God for that!

Amen.