

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



John 3:14-21 *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."*

There's an old legend about Alexander the Great, that great leader who once ruled over most of the Middle East, how he was returning to the capital after some victory in battle, and he stopped his procession as a beggar on the side of the road was asking him for some handout. It was an unusual thing for the poor, grubby beggar to be soliciting the Emperor for money, but Alexander reportedly reached into his purse and tossed the man several gold coins. And the story goes that one of his close companions remarked, "Your highness, a few *copper* coins would have been more than enough to meet his needs. Why did you give him *gold*?" And Alexander answered him, "Copper coins would suit the beggar's needs, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving." I have no idea if that legend is true, or if it was just originally fabricated as a source of good PR for the Emperor, could be either case really.

These days, we see frequently in the news, on social media, or we just hear reports of the very wealthy in our country giving enormous donations to some charity or some cause. Whenever a multi-millionaire or a billionaire gives a large chunk of money, it always seems to make headline news. I'm sure that some of them do so out of the goodness of their hearts, but, cynically, I also wonder if the donations are given in such a public manner as a source of good press, good PR for the donor.

Whatever the reasoning is, such generosity always has its limit. A very rich person might give up a portion of their wealth to help some struggling business or other group, but no one would give up all their wealth. Alexander the Great might be willing to hand out gold coins instead of copper, but he wouldn't hand over his whole empire. None of us fall in the category of "extremely wealthy," yet we'd all likely be willing to give some money, or our time, or our talents to help those in need, but we have to draw the line somewhere. Our generosity always has its limits.

Well, in God's Word for this morning, we read about another act of generosity. Percentage-wise, no gift has ever come close to this one. For in our text we read about Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who gave up absolutely everything, and He gave it to beggars. Jesus' generous giving was targeted at the entire world, it was targeted at you and me. We are the beggars, who in Christ Jesus, have received so much more than any measly monetary donation. And so, the theme we'll be considering today is:

No One Gives More Than God

Through His Son, God gives...

- I. The Antidote to heal sin's snakebite
- II. The Light to brighten the works of truth

In our Old Testament reading earlier, we read the account of the Children of Israel and the bronze serpent. The Israelites had grown impatient with God. They were tired. Tired of living in the desert,

tired of the manna that they had eaten for many years. If you remember, at one time they had been tired of being hungry and having no food to eat, so God determined to give them food. He supplied bread every morning, which the people called manna, and He sent quail into their camp every evening. And God said, ***“At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.”*** (Exodus 16:12) The people initially rejoiced! And even after the initial adulation waned, God continued to provide for the people through these miraculous means.

But by the time of our Old Testament reading, what were the people saying? ***“We loathe this worthless food.”*** (Numbers 21:5) Now, reportedly, it was very pleasant tasting! The Bible tells us this manna was able to be easily baked into cakes, and it had the pleasant taste of honey. But, regardless of its taste, regardless of it coming miraculously from God’s generous hands, the people were tired of it as some worthless nuisance in their lives. Bet let’s not kid ourselves, we would have made the same complaint.

I saw an article published by Forbes recently that declared that the average American is 90 times richer than the average historical human being. We have homes with heating and cooling and indoor plumbing. We have vehicles which come in all shapes and sizes according to our personal needs. We have ample clothes for any type of weather, and when we go to the store, there is more than enough food for us to eat. Compare that to historical standards of living, and clearly, we have it pretty good.

And what’s our response? Isn’t it generally a lack of contentment that our car is a piece of junk and we sure would like a new one? Isn’t it that we have nothing new to wear? Isn’t it that we open the fridge and groan that, even though it’s filled with food, there’s nothing for us to eat? Yes, just like the Israelites, God has blessed us with an abundance, and rather than thank Him, we often declare that ***“We loathe this worthless stuff.”***

In response to those complaints, God sent fiery serpents among the children of Israel. Painful and deadly snakebites, and there was no avoiding them. But God sent these for good reason. He wanted the people to examine their hearts and repent of their sinful ways. And that’s exactly what happened. Faced with death, the people finally turned to the one who could help; they asked Moses to pray to God for deliverance. And God responded in the most unusual way. He had Moses craft a bronze replica of the snakes, drape it over a pole and then lift it up where anyone could see. How odd that must have seemed to the people—they ask for deliverance as they are writhing in pain, and God commissions a statue. But in the end, it worked exactly as God promised. Whoever looked at the serpent on the pole lived to see another day.

Turning now to our text from the Gospel of John, we are jumping in on the last part of a conversation between Jesus and a curious Pharisee named Nicodemus. To him, Jesus makes a direct comparison to that Old Testament account. He says, ***“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”***

You should understand some things about this Nicodemus whom Jesus was talking to. In the first verse of chapter 3, we’re told that not only was he a Pharisee, a member of that very prominent religious sect, but that he was also ***“a ruler of the Jews.”*** (John 3:1) He had risen through the ranks of the Pharisees to be among the most influential. And the Pharisees were concerned mainly with one topic: “Where do I stand with God?” And whereas the Pharisaic mindset was that they could stand proudly before God on the basis of a number of earthly criteria, Nicodemus clearly wasn’t sure anymore. So, this leader of the Jews goes to find answers, by turning to Jesus, the one who could truly help. He goes to find Jesus during the middle of the night so that his buddies wouldn’t see him.

Jesus recognizes the heart of the issue and leads Nicodemus through a progression in the verses leading up to our text, showing him that it didn't matter who he was born to—that's never going to be enough to make him stand before the Lord. It didn't matter how "good" of a life he lived, because that could never be enough. Instead, He says, there's one thing that can allow you to stand in the presence of the holy God: Look to the cross where the Son of God will give His life, just like the Israelites of old looked to the serpent. Jesus wanted Nicodemus and us to despair of what human intelligence can grasp and to rely only and confidently on what God says and does.

There's a Presbyterian Church up in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, called Living Hope Community Church. And it's well-known in its area because of the layout of its sanctuary. It has the altar area up front as we do, it has the customary congregational seating area. But what sets this church apart from many others is that the cross isn't hanging on the front wall of the sanctuary. Instead, it's a rugged, 10-foot-tall cross smack dab in front of the altar area. When you're sitting in the pews, it gets in the way as you're trying to look at the pastor. And that's the point. Sitting in that church, the cross is always in view, getting in the way of anything else. And that's what we need as well. As we wonder along with Nicodemus, "Where do I stand with God?" We might be tempted to look in many different directions as our source of comfort. We might want to look to the type of lifestyle we live. We might want to look to the number of times we've gone to church or how much money we've placed in the offering plate. We might want to look at other people as some sort of twisted justification of our own actions in comparison. But, I pray that the cross stands there and obstructs our line-of-sight, so that we recognize that the only hope we have is what God has done upon the cross.

Because there, we see, that against all expectations, God's reaction to our sin was love. Because despite His people's sinful complaints and lack of thanks, God gave. When God gave life through the bronze serpent, He showed His love and concern for the Israelites in spite of their disobedience. We too have been snake bitten by our sin; our sin would separate us from God and lead us directly to hell. But God loves us in this way: He gave His own Son to become sin for us and become the antidote to heal sin's snakebite. For ***"whoever [looks up to Him will] not perish but have eternal life."***

Now, "love" is one of those words that tends to lose its meaning the more it's said. How frequently relationships fizzle where love is claimed, but where love is not shown. Well, the word "love" comes up 551 times in the Bible, but lest that word ever starts to lose its meaning, or you start to question that love from God, consider this passage. It's called the "Gospel in a Nutshell." Meaning, you can take this with you wherever you go and carry it around in your mind as the ever-present reminder of God's love. ***"God so loved the world. . ."*** Most of my life, I've assumed that "so" in there meant, "God loved the world so much." It doesn't mean that. The word in Greek is "houtos," which means, "thusly," or "in this way." In other words, God says He loves us 551 times throughout Scripture, and then He proves it. ***"God loved the world in this way: He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*** It wasn't the nails, it was God who held His Son upon the cross in the ultimate gift of love for you. Truly, no one gives more than God.

For a few days this week, we had a septic company come out to the parsonage and to the church here to drain the various septic tanks around the two properties. And naturally, I wanted to stand and watch and see how all that worked. In addition to the various sights and smells, another thing I noticed was all the bugs. Every time a new shovel full of dirt was overturned, there were another couple cockroaches and beetles scrambling to retreat back under the earth. Those type of creatures want nothing to do with the light, they want to live in the darkness. In our text, Jesus talks about another type of creature that wants nothing to do with the light, He says, ***"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed***

in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

In the gift of His only Son, God gives the antidote to heal sin's snakebite, and He also gives the light to brighten the works of men. In chapter one of his Gospel, John calls Jesus the ***"True light which enlightens everyone."*** (John 1:9) And the result is this either/or status. You're either with Jesus, living in the light, or you're opposed and living in the dark. There's no in-between. Jesus comes to each of us with true light, to lighten our lives and expose our sin, to show each of our desperate need for a Savior. But sadly, sinful human nature would rather live like bugs. Most people would prefer to go on living in the darkness of sin. The natural reaction to hearing God's law is to revolt against anyone telling them that there's something wrong in their lives that needs to be taken care of. May the Lord prevent us from recoiling from Christ's light like that. Instead, may God shine His light upon us so that we live in it, rather than scurry away from it.

You see, the light of Christ has a twofold purpose, it's just another example of how much God gives us. It does brighten sinful deeds done in the dark, but it also works as a spotlight to shine upon the good deeds of God's children. Jesus concludes this section, ***"Whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."*** The truth is, God expects our lives to be lived in the light and not in the dark. He wants our lives to resemble the lives that you might expect from redeemed children of God. He gave up His life for us, how could we not give up our lives in return! That's a heavy responsibility, but again, God gives. You might remember that our epistle reading put it like this: ***"We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*** (Ephesians 2:10) Anywhere we look in God's plan for us, we see God has given it all.

God demands perfection, Jesus was the one who gave it. God declared death for those who transgress, Jesus gave up His life. God says, there's nothing left for you to do, "Believe and be baptized." He then sends the Holy Spirit, to bring our dark hearts into the light, He blesses the water of baptism and makes it do what none of us could do with it, and says truly, ***"Baptism now saves [you]."*** (1 Peter 3:21) Again God gives it all. Now He declares, since I've done everything else for you, I want to live as my children. And again we see, He provides the good works for us to walk in, He shines the light on what is good and evil so that we may know the difference.

No one gives more than God. You know, when I was studying the text and the Old Testament reading from Numbers for this week, I just kept coming back to the oddity of the method of salvation. How strange it must have sounded to those snake-bitten Israelites. . . "Look at a serpent on a pole, and I'll be saved?" Yep, that's it. No antivenom, no salve, no antidote—all it took was simple, trusting faith in God's promise of healing and salvation, even as odd as that seemed.

I think if we went back 2000 years, nobody would have predicted that people would have crosses displayed in their churches and homes. Nobody would have thought it remotely possible that people would wear cross necklaces, or have cross earrings, or cross tattoos. "A cross? That Roman method of executing criminals? How very odd!" In our terms, that would be like people wearing electric chair necklaces or earrings. It wouldn't be very fitting at all.

It might all seem odd, but on the cross our simple, trusting faith sees much more than just a dead carpenter from Galilee. There on the cross we see the only Son of God generously given by the One who gives more than anyone else is capable of. We see love born out in much more than just simple words. On the cross, we find God giving us His love by giving us everything. In the gift of His only Son, God gives the antidote to sin's snakebite; He gives the light that brightens the works of men. These is the only gift that matters, and God's given them to you. Thanks be to God. Amen.