

Hearts and Treasures

Matthew 6:19-24; James 4:13-5:6

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” What we do every year to try to prepare children to come to this table is to work through the verse you heard them quote today, John 3:16. And we work together to define the words in the verse, God, love, world, believe, perish, eternal life. This morning I’d like to start by focusing on a word we typically don’t have time to get to, *“For God so loved the world...”*

When we hear Jesus say, *“...God so loved the world...”*, we want to hear the word *“so”* as to express intensity. God loved us so much, so intensely, that he had to send his Son to save us. He was crazy about us and he couldn’t help himself. But in fact, that is not the heart of what Jesus was getting at.

Because the words Jesus spoke in John 3:16 were his closing point in a sermon Jesus gave about snakebite. He was talking to Nicodemus about how hopeless it is for us to try to change ourselves, and Jesus remembered a wilderness story from the book of Numbers where Moses saved God’s people from an infestation of poisonous snakes by molding a bronze serpent and fastening it to the top of T-shaped pole. Crazy! If you looked at the pole, you were healed from the snakebite.

And what Jesus was saying is, *“This is how God loved the world, he sent his one and only Son, and raised him up on a pole, and if you look on him and believe, you are no longer snake-bit.”* So the focus here is not on how much God loves us, rather on how God has saved us, where we need to look if we ever want to be free from the poison that sin has introduced in our lives.

It’s not that God crazy about us. He is crazy about his Son, and where we stand with the Father entirely depends on where we stand with his Son. This is how God loved us, he raised up his Beloved on a pole. His Son has absorbed the snakebite, so we can start life over, free from the poison, the selfishness, the pride, the passions that used to rule our lives before we believed in Jesus.

And it is this reality that has turned James the Just into James the Grouch for two chapters running! This morning he tell us: *“Come now you who say, today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year and do business and make a profit..”* And you almost want to say, *“What’s your problem now? Are you against planning? Are you against business trips? Are you telling me I should never make a profit or never have any money?”* And, of course, planning and traveling and working and earning is not the heart of the problem.

The heart of the problem is the heart. The Bible is full of commands and advice about working and earning and planning and prospering. There is a place and a time for all of that. Nicodemus wasn't wrong to try to stay kosher and to learn and follow God's commands and live a life that made sense. His problem was that he forgot he was snake-bit. He forgot that all of us have ingested a poison that only a Savior can heal, that all of us are caught in a selfishness and a lawlessness that only God's Spirit can change. So Jesus set Nicodemus to looking for salvation on a pole.

I wonder if Nicodemus remembered Jesus words as he and Joseph of Arimathea took Christ's body down from the pole. What this morning is about, what James is after in his scolding is remembrance. Our remembering that Jesus is the Son God sent us so that we could find healing from the bitterness and pointlessness of sin, forgiveness for the past, purpose and direction for the future.

Only Jesus can give us life after these bodies wear down. After our money is all spent and our possessions have rotted or rusted away, only a Savior can get us what will make us alive and happy for all eternity. How easy it is for us to forget that, to get so busy with what looks bright and shiny and fun that we don't answer the Spirit, we don't remember to honor and worship Father and Son for all that they are and all that they've done to prove they love us. James and Jesus both want us to remember, and make time and place to love God back for loving us first.