

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
March 22, 2009

God So Loved!

Pastor Michael Ewart  
John 3:16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Thirty years ago on March 21, 1979, the Nebraska Ev. Lutheran High School association, an association our church belongs to, determined to begin classes starting that fall. An old, no longer used public high school in Waco, NE was purchased for just \$38,000. The first students enrolled. Lots has changed since then. The most visible change came when the 43,000 square foot expansion project was completed in 2002. The beautiful, modern facilities provide an ideal learning environment. As our congregation looks into expanding its own facilities, we know what it construction costs. That's why I was surprised to hear that NELHS only has \$600,000 in debt to the bank. While not a huge sum by current standards, the interest on that loan is enough to hurt the financial bottom line of the school. As part of the 30 year celebration, in thankfulness to God for the 550 students who have graduated from NELHS, and in support of Christian education of current and future students, NELHS is looking to pay off half of that loan through special gifts over the next four months.

But let's not lose focus. This celebration is not about giving money to NELHS. This celebration is about you and me. More specifically, it's about you, me and our relationship with God. Each of us has a critical stake in NELHS because of its Gospel ministry to high school students. For that matter, we have critical stake in this congregation, and its school, and also in our church body, the WELS. Everywhere we see opportunity to make a real difference in someone relationship with God, we've got a vital stake in that work.

Our relationship with God and concern for other's relationship with God must be our highest priority. What is that relationship like? What does God think about us? What does he have in mind for us? What does he have in store for us in the future? What about my moral shortcomings and failings? These are vital questions! God gives us the answers. The simple answer is summarized in a Bible passage I'm sure you all know by heart, John 3:16. Let's review the simple truth in that passage and rejoice! And let's do what we can to share that truth among us, and with high students, and with people everywhere.

What does the Bible say about our relationship with God? Ephesians 2 says, *'As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.'* Dead! Let that word sink in. What is the difference between "dead" and "sick." There's a huge difference, isn't there? If you received a phone call from the hospital and they said your loved one was admitted. What would your reaction be if they said, "They're sick." Not good, I know. But in contrast, what would your reaction be if they said, "I'm sorry, but your loved one has died." Totally different story. A sick person can still function. A sick person can still do *something*. A sick person can get better. In contrast, a dead person cannot function. A dead person has no life. A dead person can't do anything. Dead people don't get better.

When it comes to our relationship with God, the Bible says we are dead. Dead in our transgressions and sins. That means we cannot lift a finger to establish our help our broken

relationship with God. We cannot “get better.” By nature, we are sinners, objects of God’s wrath and therefore spiritually dead.

Jesus said this very truth in John chapter 3. Again, we probably all have John 3:16 memorized. But how familiar are you with the context of John 3:16. Take some time this week to read over that chapter a few times. We’re not going to take the time to cover it in detail now. But let’s remember the general setting. A Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He was curious and wanted to know more about Jesus’ teaching. Jesus used the opportunity to talk to Nicodemus about his relationship with God. Jesus said that if a person wanted to see the kingdom of God, he would have to be *born again*. Nicodemus was a little confused at this. He had been born once and was pretty sure he couldn’t enter into his mother’s womb to be born again. But Jesus was talking about spiritual matters. Because we are born with a sinful nature, every person is born spiritually dead.

This may sound striking, but in a sense, every time a baby is born, it is a still birth – spiritually speaking. We rejoice at the physical life created by God, but we have reason to sorrow also until there is also spiritual life created by God in that person. Whether we’re talking about a baby or a grown up, all have to be reborn spiritually, otherwise they are dead to God.

So how can we enjoy a right relationship with God in view of all of this? If we are dead, clearly we are helpless. Just as we in no way assisted with our physical birth, so also we play no part in giving ourselves life spiritually, and we in no way assist with our spiritual birth. Indeed, we are helpless. But we are not hopeless.

We are not hopeless because God *did* do something to bring us close to him. And here’s where we take a fresh look at John 3:16. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son.*” Let’s take the passage apart and rejoice. Who is acting in this verse? *God* is! We are dead spiritually, we certainly aren’t going to take the action. So what did God do? *God loved*. Another passage tells us that God *is* love. He is not moved by anything in us. Simply because God loved, he does something. We’ll see *what* in a moment. But first, whom does he love? God so loved *the world*. Here’s another truth I don’t think I spend enough time thinking about. Maybe you don’t either. God loves the whole world... every single person in it.

During times trial, trouble or suffering, are you tempted to wonder if God maybe forgot about you? When you’ve committed a grievous sin, or think back in your life to a time when you did, do you sometimes doubt that God could really love *you*. At those times, ask yourself, “Am I a part of this world?” Of course you are. Then remember and rejoice: “*God so loved the world.*” That means he absolutely, beyond all doubt, loves *you*.

God is acting. Love is what he’s doing. The world is the recipient. And how did he express it? “*He gave his one and only son.*” It’s one thing to say you love. It’s another thing to show your love. How much a person is willing to give... to sacrifice... is a pretty accurate measure of the extent of their love. Well, God gave in love for the world that which was nearest and dearest to him... that which was hardest to give up: his very own son.

Why would God sacrifice his son for the world? There’s only one possible reason. God greatly values every single person in the world, past, present and future. Therefore the sacrifice it was worth it for both the Father and the Son. ILLUSTRATION: A gem dealer was strolling the aisles at a gem and mineral Show when he noticed a blue-violet stone the size and shape of a potato. He looked it over, then, as calmly as possible, asked the vendor, “You want \$15 for this?” The seller, realizing the rock wasn’t as pretty as others in the bin, lowered the price to \$10. The stone was later certified as a 1,905-carat natural star sapphire, about 800 carats larger than the largest stone of its kind. It was appraised at \$2.28 million.

We need to recognize: spiritually, we are downright ugly because of sin and rebellion. Rough around the edges, scuffed and dirty, we're not much to look at spiritually. However, just as that gem dealer recognized the value of a seemingly ugly stone. Likewise, our Lord God recognizes the value in every human soul. Everyone, without exception! No matter who are, what you are like, no matter what you have done wrong, no matter what you have failed to do right. God loved world. God loved even you and me. And so he gave Son. God *so* loves, doesn't he?

But the sad truth is, that although Jesus was given for all and "all" are the object of God's love, there are some who don't know it, and there are some who reject it. Sadly, these do not enjoy any benefit for what Jesus accomplished on their behalf. And it is this truth that is stressed in the second half of John 3:16. *"That whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life."* Jesus is the only way, the only truth, the only life. No one comes to the Father except through him. Many think they can establish a right relationship with the Father without Jesus. They think they are good enough that God certainly must be pleased with them. They would rewrite John 3:16 to say, *"For I so love God that I give him the best that I can (which isn't perfect, but not so bad either), that by serving as good as I can I will not perish, but will earn eternal life."* That's so wrong, isn't it? Spiritually dead people do not do anything to earn or deserve God's favor and life with him. The only hope we have of a good relationship with God is if he establishes it. And that's what he did through his Son, Jesus. Only by trusting in Jesus, not self and our own efforts, will God graciously give us what Jesus accomplished for us. Namely, eternal life.

And oh, what a gift eternal life is! Note that God says that whoever believes, "has" eternal life, not "will have!" Because of Jesus, we have already begun living a life that will never end. We already live a life that is full of meaning and focused on our great God. That's also what life will be like after Judgment Day! You are already living eternally! The difference is, after we pass from this veil of tears, we will also enjoy a life free from trouble and sorrow. Life in God's light and in his immediate presence. A life that revolves perfectly around the Creator and Savior. It's indescribable! This is the life. **God so loves**, doesn't he?

I found this poem that neatly describes John 3:16 for us, and how it establishes what we need most... a right relationship with God:

For God - the Lord of earth and heaven,  
So loved - and longed to see forgiven,  
The world - in sin and pleasure mad,  
That he gave - the only Son he had,  
His only Son - to take our place,  
That whosoever - Oh, what grace,  
Believes - placing simple trust,  
In Him - the righteous and the just,  
Should not perish - lost in sin,  
But have eternal life - in HIM.

Now what does all of this have to do with celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NELHS? The teenage years are perhaps the most difficult time spiritually that anyone will face in their entire

life. The child is transitioning to an adult. It's difficult. There are new hormones raging as the body changes. Peer approval and peer pressure become primary motivators. At this crucial time in life, teens at NELHS live in an environment where John 3:16 is taught and modeled and lived every single day. If we care about the relationship people have with God, then we will care about NELHS, and thank God that here is an island, here is a place where teens can grow up physically, emotionally, and most importantly spiritually.

We rejoice in those who have attended NELHS over the past 30 years... especially those from Good Shepherd. We rejoice in those who are attending: Katie Keefe, Samantha Noffke, James Coates (former member), Elizabeth Schaewe and Steven Diede. And we look to the future when dozens more from our church might attend Good Shepherd. In love for them, out of concern for their relationship with God, and in thankfulness to our Lord, let us continue to support our high school. Might you consider giving a special offering toward their building debt? Amen.

Proverbs 22:6: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." Psalm 119:89: "Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens." Amen.