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Genesis 1:26-31, John 3:16-21
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"The Gift of God"

I have a friend who is a great leader. He serves as the chair of a Board of Trustees on which I serve. No matter what issues are being discussed, no matter how many rabbit trails we try to go down, no matter how littered the discussion is with opinions, he has the ability to bring everyone back to seek clarity on the main issue at hand. This is his special gift for leadership. He knows how to get to the heart of matter. It is so easy for the church to get distracted by non-essentials, to spend our time and energy on matters of secondary importance and to miss the heart of the gospel. The great reformer Martin Luther thought of these words of Jesus as the heart of the matter. He called them the gospel in miniature:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

These words of Jesus remind us of the heart of the gospel. They are the gospel in miniature because they awaken us to the gift of God for the salvation of the world. Jesus speaks these words in a conversation with a man named Nicodemus. All of his life, Nicodemus has been faithful believer; he has been a leader of the Jewish people. Nicodemus is confused. How does the teaching of Jesus relate to everything he has ever known and believed about God? The story is full of ironic contrast. Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish council of elders, comes to Jesus in the dark of night to seek the light. He is a teacher of the faith of Israel who seeks the truth of God. Nicodemus is fully grown and discovers he must be born again. Jesus sums up everything with these words. In this encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus discovers the essence of the gospel-the gift of God. Jesus says, "For God so loved the world." To those of us in the church, the truth of these words may seem self-evident. In Genesis, we hear how God created the world in all its rich diversity. On the sixth day of creation, God made all the creatures that inhabit the earth and declared the creation to be good. Then, on that same day, God created humankind in the divine image and gave human beings everything that is necessary to sustain life. God gave humankind the purpose of keeping the earth and caring for creation. God saw everything that was made and declared it very good. You might say that God saw the harmony, order and symmetry of the creation and delighted in the creation. God loved the created world.

If everything had stayed the way God intended things to be, then the evidence of God's love for the world would be plain for everyone to see. As we know, the divine balance was upset by human sin; the harmony of creation was destroyed by human pride. Now, we see starvation in Africa, religious, ethnic and political groups warring in the Middle East, families torn apart by domestic violence, human lives overwhelmed by drug addiction and poverty in the wealthiest nation in human history. It is no surprise that people question God's love for the world. At the same time, we also see people working for peace and for an end to hunger and disease; we see religious groups striving for mutual understanding; we see teachers, politicians, business leaders, social workers, volunteers and legal and medical

professionals toiling to make life better for others. There is so much pain and so much beauty in our world that it is hard to see the truth.

It is only through the witness of Scripture that we dare to affirm the truth: God loves the world. The power of God's love runs in and through all things. The greatest reality in the universe is not cold, indifferent fate but the force of God's loving will. No matter what new theories physicists develop to explain the mechanics of the universe, these theories will only lead people of faith into a deeper and deeper appreciation for the mystery and beauty of God's actions in the world. The power of God's love sustains the cosmos (world). Yes, human sin, evil, cruelty, natural disasters and tragedy do exist but these things shall not overcome the redemptive love of God for creation. Paul declares in the 8th Chapter of Romans that the creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

If God loves the world, then why does God allow such suffering to continue? Why doesn't God do something? God does something. God gives the only begotten Son to save the world. God gives us many things. God gives us life, the created world around us, the stars in the night sky and the people with whom we share our lives. When God sends Jesus into the world, God gives God's own self. Unlike the prophets and priests before him, Jesus does not simply impart knowledge about God to us. Jesus is the embodiment, the incarnation, of God. He is sent from the depths of God's love to be the truth. Jesus is both love and truth. Truth is no longer some abstract philosophical principle. The truth is not a propositional statement. Truth is, as the theologian Paul Tillich says, "Something which happens." Tillich writes, "Truth is something new, something which is done by God in history and, because of this something which is done in the individual life. ...Truth is a stream of life, centered in Christ, actualized in everybody who is connected with Him, organized in the assembly of God, the Church. ...The decision for or against truth is the life-and-death decision in which Christ is accepted or rejected. ...You can only do the truth by following Him or do the lie by denying Him." (p. 47, *The Shaking of the Foundation*) The truth is Jesus.

God is present in Jesus Christ in a way that God is not present in any other human being or created reality. The Greek, which is translated as "only Son" in our pew Bible, actually says, "only begotten Son." Even though Jesus is born in this world like every other human child, we do not say that Jesus is created or made by God. We say that Jesus is begotten by God. In him, the very being of God is mysteriously and wonderfully present. In Jesus, we see God's own self in human flesh. The Nicene Creed emphasizes this critical point when it declares that Jesus is "very God of very God, begotten not made." In the early church, there were those who were willing to say that, even though Jesus Christ is like God, he is only a created being like the rest of us. There were those who said that Jesus Christ is on our side of the great divide between creation and the Creator. The Nicene Creed dares to claim that Jesus bridges the gap between the creation and its Creator. In him, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He is not just similar to God; he is God.

The gift of God is that those who believe in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life. God's gift leads to life. Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world but to set the world free for life. The world has already condemned itself through its rejection of

God and its love for the darkness. Jesus comes to bring life to the world so that we might live in unity with God.

Dr. Diogenes Allen, professor emeritus of Princeton Seminary, has written in his book entitled, *Love*, that we are a restless people who seek satisfaction in the good things of life. We seek the pleasure of good company, entertainment, success in school, athletics, business and relationships. However good these things are, they cannot give us complete satisfaction. In fact, when we try to make them the ultimate desire and goal of our existence, we often turn the good things of life into something evil, distorted or idolatrous. Bit by bit, we may come to the realization that however good these things are, only something beyond this life and this world can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. Allen speaks of the vast emptiness at the center of our personalities that can only be filled by God's love (p. 120).

Although we are caught in the power of sin and death, the love of God sacrifices itself in Jesus Christ to free us from sin and death. St. John of the Cross wrote, "Love consists not in feeling great things ... but in suffering for the beloved" (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*). This is what God's love does for us. God suffers for us in Jesus Christ so that we may have abundant and eternal life. This gift of life is a free gift of God that we can only receive through faith. All we can do is to say, with humble gratitude, "Thank you." As Tillich said, "The decision for or against truth is the life-and-death decision in which Christ is accepted or rejected. ...You can only do the truth by following Him." The promise is not that we shall be spared suffering or physical death but that we shall live forever in the presence of God. At the time of the 1991 Gulf War, I saw a newspaper column in written by Michael McManus. In the column, he tells of a letter he received from a young American soldier about to be deployed to Kuwait from Saudi Arabia. The young soldier, named Chris, wrote, "I am standing here before the greatest trial of my life [so far] and staring into the darkness with only the torch of the hope of heaven to light my way and my wits. A torch which is doubtless fueled by the hoards of those praying faithfully for my keepsake..." Chris goes on to wonder what all those prayers and the scripture promises will mean for him as he faces the invasion. "Am I guaranteed God's physical protection in the war? The answer is no. I am guaranteed God's best for me, His will, whatever that may be. I have a hunch God has more yet for me to accomplish and suffer in this world before he brings me Home..." (*The State*, March 9, 2001).

When our lives become full of stress, confusion and adversity, when it feels like we are only moving in endless circles, when it seems that we cannot discern what is real and what is true, then it is good to remember the simple truth of the gift of God. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Here is the heart of the matter. Here is the gospel in miniature. We find our life by trusting Jesus. No matter how things may appear, God loves this creation and God loves you. God sends the only begotten Son to make this divine love known. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we come to experience God's abundant and everlasting life.