

At the start of this week, as I was reading the two wonderful passages set for today, I was wrestling with which passage to preach on. The gospel contains one of the most famous verses in the Bible John 3:16, and the epistle from Ephesians is a real purple patch. It's St. Paul at his most profound and poetic. Then I noticed that the two passages have similar themes. They both contain similar words, they have words in common. So I thought that if I focus on the commonality, I can maybe speak on both passages at the same time and then I wouldn't have to choose between them. So that's what I'm going to do. The first, perhaps most obvious words that they have in common is love. John 3:16 begins, "For God so loved the world." And at the heart of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we read this. "God out of His great love with which He loved us, made us alive together with Christ."

All our talk about God must begin with the fact that God is love. There is so much that we don't know about God. But this, we do know: that God loves us. I used to have a very wise church warden who in the midst of any disagreement in the parish would always say, "Well, let's go back to first principles." And he was right, because what we would do is stop and then go right back to what was most important, where we were coming from. And the reason that's helpful is that our thinking often goes awry when we begin from the wrong starting point. We need to get our first principle sorted out to head us off in the right direction. And when it comes to the first principle about the divine, then it's this: God is love. How much hurt would be avoided in our world if everyone understood the great love which God has for each one of us, a love which extends not just to us, but the people that we find it difficult to love. All of us are loved by God's great love.

I once heard a speaker begin a very good talk by holding up a \$20 bill and saying to the audience, "Hands up if you would like this \$20 bill." Well of course, a lot of hands shot up. Then he said, "Well, I'm going to give this bill to one of you, but first of all, let me do this." And he screwed the bill up in his hand. And then he said again, "And who would like this \$20 bill?" Well, same number of hands went up. He said, "It's coming to one of you," but he then dropped it on the floor. He dropped it on the floor

and he stood on it and crunched it up a bit. Then he picked it up and said, "Who wants this \$20 bill?" Well, the hands still went up. And the speaker said, "Well, you've all learned a very important lesson this week: that you want this bill because it's not decreased in value because I've trodden on it or I've crumpled it up."

Many times in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled, ground into the dirt by decisions we make or by things that happen to us. We feel as if we are worthless, but no matter what happens to us, we never lose our value in God's eyes. Just as that bill never lost its value. Dirty or clean, crumpled or finally creased, we are priceless to God. God still loves each one of us. God's love has no limits. It reaches out to all of us, everyone we meet and as it says in John, "God's love embraces the whole world. God so loved the world" John says.

And that text, John 3:16 was the text given to Martin Luther King Jr on his first Sunday at Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery. And he preached a sermon that day. The words of which resonate throughout all the sermons and talks that he went on to give for the rest of his life. "God's love has breath," he said in his first sermon. "It is a big love, it's a broad love. God's love is too big to be limited to a particular race. It's too big to be wrapped in a particularist garment. It is too great to be encompassed by any single nation. God is a universal God."

God loves us with a big, broad love, and it's a giving kind of love. John says, "God so loved the world that He gave." St. Paul says, "By grace, you have been saved. It is the gift of God." Grace is the word we use to describe God's giving kind of love, which is there in both of our readings. God's love comes to us before we do anything to deserve it. God takes the initiative and reaches out to us. To quote St. Paul again, who knew all about grace, "By grace, you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God."

There's a great story about grace in an English book by a veterinarian called James Herriot who worked in the Yorkshire Dales. And they made a classic British TV series of these books. If you haven't seen them, I'm confident in recommending them. I think you'd

enjoy them, given how many British TV shows people tell me that they enjoy watching. The show's called All Creatures Great And Small. And in one of Herriot's books, there's a story about when he took his wife out to dinner on their anniversary and they had some mishap on the way to the restaurant. And they enjoyed a lovely meal, a slap up meal. But when they came to, to pay, they realized that they didn't have any money because they'd lost their wallet on the way to the restaurant. And just as Herriot was starting to get very panicked about this, the waiter came over to him and said, without knowing that he'd lost his wallet. He said, "Don't worry about paying. Your partner, the senior partner in the practice, rang up earlier. He knew you were coming here for your special occasion. So he's already paid the bill in full."

God has already done something similar to us. All that needs to be done to restore our relationship with God has already been done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has reconciled us to God. Everything has been taken care of. There's nothing we can do to add to what God has done in Christ Jesus.

The final word, common to both passages is about elevation. Jesus says something rather odd in the gospel. He says this. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. So must the son of man be lifted up." And Jesus is referring here to an Old Testament story in the Book of numbers. And I won't go into the detail now, but I do want to point out that the word that John uses for "lifted up" has two meanings and He's deliberately using it because of its two meanings.

The first meaning refers to Jesus's death. John talks here as he does later in the gospel, as in fact we'll see next week, about Jesus being lifted up on the cross. John knows that Jesus must be lifted up to win our salvation. And that as we look upon the crucified Christ, we realize that it was out of His great love that He hung there. Jesus was held to the cross by love, not by nails. And this same Greek word, "hupsoó" is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe Jesus's ascent into the heavens. At His ascension, Jesus is lifted up into the heavens. It's the same word that Peter uses to say that God has lifted Jesus up to the right hand

on high. So John is deliberately using a word associated with Jesus's glorification to describe what happened to him on the cross at His death.

The two go together. One could not happen without the other. The way of the cross is the way of glory, which echoes what we were saying last week about the cross being God's foolishness, God's foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God. Those of us who are being saved know that Jesus suffered on our behalf, that He won our salvation and that we will be raised with him. And there's talk of elevation in the epistle too.

St. Paul says that, "We have been raised up with Jesus and seated with him in the heavenly places." And this elevating verb also has a double meaning. Note, the tense. We have been raised up. The eternal life of which John speaks in the gospel has already begun. It starts when we are born again, we're born into a new way of living, one empowered by God's Spirit. Living within us. We're lifted out of the way of sin that leads to destruction, to live the life of the Spirit.

And then of course there's another sense that we're raised up: the hope that is within us, that we celebrate particularly in this Easter coming season. As it says in the New Testament we, along with all God's people, will be raised up on the last day. We will get to share in Jesus' victory on the cross, the victory that He won for us over sin and death. Death will not have the last word. Jesus walked the way of the cross and it led to a crown of glory. And that's the path that we're called to follow. We worship a God who loves us, who gave himself for us and calls us to walk with him so that we may be raised up with him.

Amen.