

Kirby Lawrence Hill
March 15, 2015
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:16-21

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

LIGHT HEARTED

A couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to go to a birthday party for a three year old. The gift from our family was a golden oldie, Dr. Seuss' Book of A, B, C's along with colorful magnetic letters that could be arranged on the refrigerator. It got me to remembering how our children learned letters, words, and concepts in their pre-school years. Each evening Nancy or I would read with our children as part of our bedtime ritual. They would be dressed in their pajamas, sitting on a lap – it's among the times I cherish as a great privilege of parenting. Reading and prayers and a good night kiss – generally it was a good way to end a day. Then we would turn on their music for them to go to sleep by, turn off the light, which made the nightlight come on, and leave the room. It all felt quite cozy for parents and children alike.

Some of the books early on were pictures of objects with the associated word next to them – ball, house, dog, car. They learned these words and objects quite quickly. Later on there would be books that told more of a story, through which they learned more words and objects as well as certain concepts. I guess the follow-up questions were for exploring the concepts. Do you think that person in the story was loved? Why was that gift given? Questions like that - the goal was for them to learn their letters and words, but also to begin to understand the world around them in particular ways. Part of what we also wanted them to begin to be able to read were the hearts of the parents who loved them, as a base for their encounters with the world.

After worship today, Jan and I will be meeting with the youth who are a part of our confirmation group, who are now taking the next step toward a more mature faith in reading the world in which they live and how the concepts of God and love fit into it. If Warner members were asked to give the basic beliefs of Christianity, some of you might quote a verse from our reading today, John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." But I would hope that something in addition would be said, for this one verse in our society has become somewhat like a scriptural hot-air balloon so weighted down by the sandbags of fear-based fire-and-brimstone preaching in some places, that it's difficult to find what could be a spiritual uplift. Our reading today did not include the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus that leads up to this verse. Ironically, Jesus is speaking to someone with a fairly literalistic and legalistic approach to matters of faith and our Lord seems to be trying to help him see God's saving work more expansively. And yet some hold up this verse as the epitome of an exclusive Christianity that would proclaim: "Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior or go to hell forever."

How do we understand the world around us in light of the concepts and story we hear in scripture? It's not easy to know what to think of a world where videos go viral showing fraternity brothers at an institution of higher learning joyfully singing of the prospects of lynching people of a particular race, or another ISIS execution that purports to show a 12 or 13 year old boy repeatedly shooting someone in disfavor in the head and then proclaiming that God is great. What are we to think of a world where people so casually abuse positions

of power or where violence is thought of as a first resort instead of a last one? It challenges our hearts when we see such hateful actions carried out with all kinds of rationales being given to try to justify them.

This might be when we need to imagine crawling up onto God's lap to soak in the story - one that does not say that God so loved the people of a particular race, or that God so loved the people of a particular religion, or that God so loved people who were members of a particular political party, but that God so loved the world... God's love for humanity and for all that God has created is both deeper and wider than we have normally imagined. God loves not only those who are hated, but also those who are filled with hatred.

This is where we need to come to realize that our formative story is not one where it says that God so loved the status quo that God did nothing or even guarded what was a particular state of affairs. Instead, into a world filled with hatred, God sent divine love embodied in the person of Jesus whose self-giving would work in such redemptive ways that the kind of living that is eternal would become a possibility within this world. Encounters with God's love are what can open hearts to God's light that has come into this world.

We might compare ourselves to those who do the most dreadful, destructive things in our world, who seem to be trying to make a hell on earth. In contrast to them, we may begin to think our hearts and lives are filled with God's light and love. And then we might be likely to think all kinds of vile things not only about their actions, but also about them, until we realize that our Lord was willing to die for people very much like them. God's love and light actually beckon us to compare ourselves instead to Jesus, whose love was so expansive, whose self-giving was so total, that we realize we still have a ways to go.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." So for me, believing in God's great gift of Jesus is not so much about being rewarded with a place of eternal bliss and luxury where we can live forever in perpetual avoidance of misery. But, rather it is an openness to allow God's eternal life-giving light to shine in our hearts and through our lives as we learn to be agents of God's love.

That leads me to the realization that we still need to learn not just the A, B, C's and language of divine love, but the concepts to which it leads. Time to explore questions about whether a certain person was loved and why a gift was given is still needed. Even as we gather, we continue to learn to read the heart of the God who shares the stories with us so that our own hearts know how to relate to the world of which we are a part. All of that doesn't make the whole world a nice warm and cozy place, but we can at least understand that it is a world with which God's love is not yet finished, just like God's love is not yet finished with us. And when the world confuses and confounds us, we can crawl back into God's lap to hear and be shaped by the story once again.