John 3:16. Even if you didn't own a Bible or had never been to church, chances are you would be familiar with this verse. You might have seen it on a sign held up by a guy in a frizzy rainbow wig at a ballgame. Or you might have read it on a bumper sticker or heard a friend refer to it in a familiar way. “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.” Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature,” saying that the very heart of Scripture and the message of Christ is found in this passage. Just two weeks before he died, Luther repeated the verse and said, “What spartan saying can be compared with this wonderful brevity? It is a Bible in itself.” In his dying moments, Luther repeated the words again, three times, in Latin. August Van Ryn, an American Bible teacher, claimed that one could find in this verse “an ocean of thought in a drop of language” J.C. Ryle said of it, “a more wonderful verse is not to be found in the Bible!” It is a short, easily memorized Bible verse that lays out the incredible lengths to which God has gone to have a relationship with us. Many a Christian or one seeking to know more about God has found comfort and hope in these 27 words. “For God so loved the world.” Other translations of the Bible translate the word for “so” as “in this way” or “like this.” God loved the world in this way, God loved the world like this: “he gave his only Son.” God made the ultimate sacrifice, giving his only Son to die, not because of what he had done but because of what we had done to separate ourselves from God. The Son could have refused, could have found a way out of the dreadful fate in which he found himself, but Jesus accepted death freely, went straight through it, not for his sake, but for ours. “So that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Not only does God love us and give his Son's life for us, God gives us faith to believe that these things are true. Much has been made in the Christian world about the choice we have to believe or not believe what God has done for us. Those who believe, some say, receive the gift of eternal life; those who don't, are condemned to a life outside the loving arms of God. But God is the actor in the gospel story. God loves the world. God gives his Son. God gives us faith to believe. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Those forces that separate us from God's love push us away into isolation, into crises of life and faith. Only God has the power to bring us back into God's presence, into the embrace of God's forgiving love. And God does that, over and over again, because God cannot stand to be separated from us.

You and I won't find that same kind of belonging anywhere else in the world. In the end, the things of this world that promise us comfort turn out to be just things. Our jostling for positions of power turns out to be pointless for true power is not found in human structures. Our ordering of ourselves into categories of worth is meaningless because God loves each of us the same. There is nothing we can do to earn God's love and nothing we can do to lose it. So where does that leave us? It leaves us helpless and needy and vulnerable, none of which is a prized place to be in our culture. And it makes us not the leaders we might imagine ourselves to be but followers of the one who created us, loves us and commands us to love others. If given a choice, it's not always the kind of life we would choose for ourselves. David Lose writes about a sermon he preached years ago in which he spoke about what he calls the offensive nature of God’s grace. Lose speaks of the claim this grace makes on us. “Notice,” he writes, “that God doesn't ask our permission first before sending Jesus to die for us...think of the claim a person – any person has on us once they've saved our life, let alone died doing it. In the face of such love, such sacrifice, we must surrender all our claims.” Lose shares the story told to him by a friend who had a bedtime encounter with his six-year-old son. Upset that his father was putting him to bed earlier than he wanted to go, Benjamin said, “Daddy, I hate you.” Benjamin’s father, exercising a great level of parental wisdom, replied, “Ben, I’m sorry you feel that way, but I love you.” Benjamin’s response to such gracious words surprised his dad: “Don’t say that!” “I’m sorry Benjamin, but it’s true. I love you.” “Don’t,” his son protested, “Don’t say that again!” At which point Ben’s father said, “Benjamin, I love you…like it or not!”

Lose suggests adding four words to the end of our service of baptism, saying, “Child of God, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit…like it or not.” For God's love can be offensive. It can intrude on our neatly ordered lives, demanding things from us that we don't really want to give. Such love forces us to rethink the decisions we've made about other people, makes us examine the grudges we bear and the judgments we cling to so tightly. Such love reminds us that, hard as we try, we can never claim our lives as our own, for we belong to to the One sent to be our Savior, our Lord, our leader, our brother Christ. Such love exposes us to danger, for any one of us might reject the light offered to us because of the way it exposes what is dark in us. To “believe” this Good News in a way that brings us into a fuller relationship with God requires more than “believing that;” it requires “trusting in.” To trust in Jesus is not simply to believe something about what happened long ago, but also to let our own lives be transformed by the Jesus we encounter in this story.

What needs to happen in you or me so we are open to this transformation? What do we have to give up to receive the fullness of God's grace? What must change in us to make us admit the truth: that we will never be saved by our own works or accomplishments and are totally dependent on God's love for a full and meaningful life? Like it or not, you and I are loved by a God whose love will transform us, will make demands of us, will turn us into lovers of compassion, peace and healing. And God will do this on God's time and God's terms, not ours. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Like it or not, God loves us like crazy and makes us part of his plan to blanket the world in love. May we celebrate this amazing love and the free gift that it is. And may we trust in God to make of us what we sometimes rebel against: disciples of the one who strips us of our false security and makes us part of a movement of love and grace.

Amen.

*Lent 4B*

*March 15, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 3:14-21*