

Foolish Love

2nd Sunday in Lent; Series A

John 3:1-17

My siblings and I are not typically picky eaters. My parents raised us on garden fruits and vegetables and the monthly menu regularly consisted of such dishes as stuffed green peppers, liver and onions. However, I can recall a time when I was seven years old; shortly after my family moved into our house in Dimondale, Michigan that we sat down to eat an 'inedible' vegetable that my mother served. The meal consisted of a vegetable in the form of an old jar of pickled beets leftover in the cellar pantry from the previous homeowners. My mother had innocent intentions and meant only to give her children their needed nutrition and daily servings of vegetables. Though, my brothers and sister and I did not think about this at the time. Approximately two digested pickled beets later we began conducting a covert operation to dispose of the remaining beets. The dumping ground was to be the dog food dishes located in the dog pen in our backyard. I am sure some of you like pickled beets and the truth be told, I do now that I am older. But as a young child the pickle-ness was not pleasing to the taste buds. Maybe there are some 'good for you' dishes that are just not good to *you*?

In order to digest and process things in life with ease, predictability helps. Maybe this is why corn or carrots are more attractive options for getting our daily servings of vegetables than pickled beets. They are predictable and palatable. When eating carrots or corn we usually know what we are getting. You can look at it and recognize the taste. Similarly, my brothers and sister and I knew what beets were and we knew what they tasted like. Being garden eaters, we tasted a good variety of vegetables. What we were unprepared for though was the pickled part of the beets. The nutrition that our growing bodies needed came in such an unfamiliar and unpalatable form for our immature taste buds. There is something about predictability that is comforting. When our life is in a predictable form, it is stable and is manageable and within our control. This is perhaps why we need daily routines. We know what to expect next. It is predictable.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus by the cover of nightfall to engage in a theological discussion expecting to understand Jesus and his teaching. And so he "puts on his thinking cap" and asks questions like, "How can someone be 'born again' if they have already been born by their mother? Are they supposed to enter the womb a second time?" He tries to bring Jesus' teaching *down* to his level and submit it to his own understanding. He wants to make Jesus' teaching easier to digest instead of simply taking Jesus at his word. At least he didn't go straight to the dog dish with it! Nicodemus comes at night as a representative of the Pharisees and a ruler of the Jews. He starts by telling Jesus what "we" know: "We know you are a teacher from God, for no one else can do these things." To a degree, though, Nicodemus represents every person. He demonstrates for us every individual's quest to make sense of and understand God, to get God on our terms and place him under our control and understanding. Even, 'to be like him' as Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3).

In order to believe what Jesus is saying it needs to make logical sense in his head. For, Nicodemus is not just going to swallow pickled beets. His beliefs need to be palatable, appealing to the senses, conveniently organized so that he can be in control. Similar to the Jewish Religion that Nicodemus practices, if a Jew is circumcised according to the covenant of circumcision, obeys the Law of Moses (10 Comm.), observes the proper festivals and follows the ceremonial laws then he/she shall certainly see the Kingdom of God. This way God fits neatly into the religious thought process. God is manageable and controllable and man is in charge of his salvation. This is religion in a bite size, predictable and palatable form. However, Jesus will not let Nicodemus receive him this way—that is as a part of a system of works, as the one who is ultimately in control. So Jesus begins to tell Nicodemus what he does not know.

Jesus gives Nicodemus a tough dish to swallow. He tells Nicodemus that he must believe and trust God and his ways *not* try to control him. The way God loves his people is *not* easy to grasp. **The only predictable thing is that God will ALWAYS love his people.** The way he loves an unbelieving, broken world that so often seeks shelter in the cover of darkness is left up to his unconventional, unpredictable, irrational and seemingly foolish wisdom.

It is very difficult for the world to believe in God and trust his love. His love is like getting a serving of vegetables in the form of pickled beets. It is certainly what we need but not what we want or expect. God's ways are often *the opposite* of the world's ways. **God's love is good for us but it is presented to us in a form that is sometimes very difficult to swallow.**

We hear of an example in our readings this morning. Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." God's love for his people comes in such unusual forms—a bronze serpent on a pole and the Christ on a cross. This is the way it is to be. This is how God forgives his people. This is how he loves a broken people. As I have heard God's unusual love for his people expressed before, "If we were all a bunch of broken clay pots then it is like God becoming a clay pot to fix the broken clay pots." God's love seems completely foolish. God loves us not in the way we think. *The way* he loves is certainly unpredictable, it is difficult to swallow and it makes no sense to our conventional wisdom. It is the kingdom of God that can only be seen with eyes of faith. Ultimately if we are to receive and believe God's love for us we must digest one important truth, He is God and we are not. And he is a God who abounds and overflows with steadfast love.

During their nightly discussion, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of God's abounding love for his people by referring to the Old Testament story of Moses and the bronze serpent. Since Nicodemus was a Pharisee he would have been familiar with this story. Jesus reminds him of this story and then compares it to Christ and the cross so that Nicodemus can more easily believe and trust in God's love for his people.

He says to Nicodemus, "Just as God saved the mumbling, grumbling and complaining Israelites from his own wrath and anger by giving them a Word of promise to believe in and a sign to accompany it, so this same God of love is going to do one better and save you and the whole world with you! It will not be the way you think, though. It will not make logical sense and it will not be easy to understand and even more difficult to believe in *because you can't be in control*. But you have my Word of promise that it will be so. Just as God loved his Israelites by telling Moses to save them with a bronze serpent on a pole, so he will save the whole world by lifting up his own Son on a cross. I know it sounds foolish. Yet this is the way it has to be. This is how God will show his love to his people. He is a powerful God who can do it and he is a God who keeps his promises, so he will do it! Will you not believe it? Will you not receive his love and trust him at his Word?"

Martin Luther once described God's love for his people as a flame that devours a drop of water. Also, as the ocean tide that engulfs the sand grains as it hits the beach. This is God's surrounding love for you and me. It is not the way we expect. It comes in seemingly foolish forms. God's love leaves us entirely at his mercy. We cannot always reason out how he can go through such great lengths to love a sinner like you and me who will always struggle to love himself/herself more than God. It is not easy to understand. But we have his promise that this is how he will love sinners. It is not a promise to be spit out and put in the dog dish as we might do with a vegetable that we don't like. It is a Word of love for us to graciously receive and believe and trust in all our days. Amen.