

**GOOD FRIDAY—TENEBRAE VESPERS**

Text: THE PASSION OF OUR LORD ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When we Americans think of or use the word, “*love*,” we are usually speaking or thinking of that warm, cuddly, saccharin, sweet, romantic, kind of emotion invented by Hollywood and romance novelists that occurs between a man and a woman. You know what I mean; the kind that brings a tear to your eye and a lump to your throat when the hero gets the girl.

Certainly, there are other ways in which we use the word “*love*.” For example, we also use it for the positive emotions shared in a familial relationship, such as a parent’s love for his or her children and vice versa, or the love of siblings for one another. Or we might use the word “*love*” to describe our feelings for a close personal friend or a very respected associate. Very often, we use the word “*love*” to describe the joy or pleasure we experience from a thing or an event such as, “*I love Christmas*,” “*I love ice cream*,” “*I love flying*,” “*I love my truck*,” etcetera.

While each use of the word “*love*” speaks to a different range of emotions, each use is linked to the others with the one thing they all have in common. Each use of the word “*love*” speaks of a positive feeling or emotion; an emotion that leaves one feeling uplifted. That is because for most Americans, the word “*love*” means a feeling of contentment, of being at peace with oneself and the world around us, a feeling of happiness.

This limited understanding of “*love*” may be a huge contributing factor to the abysmal divorce rate experienced in our country today. We Americans see “*love*” as the be-all-end-all of life, and the be-all-end-all of “*love*,” that is, the type of love held in the highest regard, is romantic love. Yet, such love is pure fantasy because such love is predicated on always feeling satisfied and fulfilled. Such love can only last as long as one remains infatuated, and when infatuation fades away, when one is no longer happy or satisfied with the relationship, such love quickly fades away as well.

Thus, love may be a many-splendored thing, but love, as we Americans generally understand it, is more selfish than it is altruistic or self-sacrificing, because love, as we generally understand it, is self-centered, such that “*love*” remains centered in the one *doing* the loving; in the *emotions* of the lover. In other words, that understanding of “*love*” depends entirely on how the lover “*feels*” about his or her “*beloved*,” whatever or whomever that may be. Love, for us then, is love, only as long as one feels good and positive about one’s relationship with the

person or thing being loved, that is, only as long as the person or thing being loved makes us feel happy.

For this reason, you will never hear me say, *“I love green beans,”* or *“I love liver.”* Neither could ever make me happy. It would be impossible to love something that only serves to make me so unhappy. It is, by the way, the same reason that it is so difficult for one to love one’s enemies, or even his or her neighbor as much as one loves oneself.

Yet, this is exactly how God loves each one of us who are, in fact, truly unlovable. God’s love for us does not make Him *“happy.”* He does not awaken in the morning and put on a big smiley face just thinking about us. God’s love for us caused Him indescribable pain and suffering. One can think of God’s love for us as that of a woman who, having already experienced the pain involved in giving birth, still desires to have more children. She is willing to suffer the pain of giving birth for the joy of giving life. Such love is our LORD’s love. The Church calls it our LORD’s *“passion.”*

Such love, *is* our LORD’s love, but the problem is that we seldom, if ever, see it that way. Our misunderstanding of the love of God can be directly attributed to just how we translate and then interpret the original language of Holy Scripture. Take the Gospel of St. John, the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, the 16<sup>th</sup> verse. I am sure you all know it; you hear it from this very altar every week. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten SON, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* Something gets lost in the translation from the Koine Greek of the original Biblical text to the English language.

You see we hear the word *“so”* and assume it describes the quality or quantity of God’s love for the world just as one might say to a loved one, *“I love you so,”* meaning, *“I love you so very much!”* But this, in fact, is not so! It is not an incorrect translation; it is an incorrect assumption. Our assumption is not correct because we so seldom use the word *“so”* as it is being used here. Here, the word is used as in, *“Say it is not so,”* or *“Is that so?”* We are not asking, *“Say it is not so much,”* but we are saying, *“Say it is not that way.”* Therefore, it might be clearer for the verse to say, *“God loved the world in such a way that He gave...,”* or *“Thus, God loved the world and gave...,”* or *“God loved the world in this manner: He gave....”*

So, when JESUS was talking to Nicodemus that evening, it was not as though He was describing how much God loved the world or even the great depth of God’s love, as though He were about to compose a romantic love song or a contemporary Christian ditty sung in so many Christian congregations today. He was simply telling Nicodemus in what **way** God loved the world: by giving over His only-begotten SON to die for a rebellious and sinful world full of those who would hate Him and kill Him after choosing Satan and Barabbas instead of Him. In describing how His FATHER loved the world, JESUS was talking about His death. He was saying that His death is how God loves the world, His death is how He would redeem the world, His death is how He would atone for our sins and reconcile the world to His FATHER.

It is this very same meaning that St. John communicates to us in his first epistle, *“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His SON to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”* God loved us in this way, and therefore, we should love our neighbor whether they love us in return or not. This is the love of God. This is how He loves you. He loves you by dying on the Cross for you. That love is painful; it is not happy, it is not joyful, it is not giddy. It is sorrow and anger over sin. It is compassion and pain for the lost.

Thus, true human love, just as divine love, is not self-serving or self-centered; it is self-giving and self-sacrificing. It serves the object of one’s love. True love does not lay in contentment or happy thoughts. True love is service to one’s neighbor, whomever that neighbor may be. Therefore, to rightly understand the love of God is to understand that God’s love is not simply good feelings and happy thoughts. God has no happy thoughts for sinners or sin. God’s love hurts God because the love of God is not a feeling or a simple emotion; God’s love killed God. God’s love is who God is; it is what He does. The love of God *is* God even as St. John writes, *“God is love.”*

God’s love makes it possible for us to celebrate this day. We call it *“Good Friday,”* but at first blush, there is nothing about this day that one would naturally call *“good.”* It was Good Friday, after all, that our LORD, having been betrayed, arrested, beaten, and spat upon the previous night, was, again beaten nearly to death and tried by a kangaroo court that sentenced Him to the cruelest and most painful of deaths—a sentence sadistic men were only too happy to execute. Not a very pretty picture, and yet, we celebrate and rejoice in this Man of sorrows. We celebrate His Love. We celebrate His Cross because that is *how* He loves us.

We celebrate, not like Satan and his demons who did not yet know that in their seeming victory at the death of our LORD, was their total defeat. We do not delight in JESUS’ innocent suffering and death, but we do delight in and celebrate God’s love. We mourn that it was our sins that sent JESUS to His Cross, but we celebrate and rejoice in the love of God that compelled Him to love us in such a way that He sent His SON to die for us while we were yet His enemies, so that we can be saved.

This is the way God has loved us: He has given Himself to die for us to give Himself to us in the Bread and Wine, in the Body and Blood of His Holy Supper, that we may eat of His sacrifice and live. God has given it *“to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls.”*

If JESUS had not died for us, there would be no Blood in the Chalice and there would be no forgiveness, for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. If JESUS had not died for us there would be no Body on the Paten, nor in the Ciborium, and we could not eat and drink of God’s sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. There would be no New Covenant sealed with the sacrificed Body and Blood of Christ! If JESUS had not died for us, there would be no life for us, and we would still be dead in our sins. For God *so* loved the world that He has given His

Body and Blood upon the altar for us wretched sinners to eat and to drink as an atonement for our souls.

This is God's love: He has given us the life of His SON. That is why we call this day "*Good Friday*." It is the day our LORD reconciled all things to Himself through the death of His SON. It is the day promised by God and foretold by the prophets. It is the day of our victory in CHRIST, God's perfect Sacrifice. It is the day the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in its goodness even as we rejoice in God's love and how He has loved us.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

✠ ✠ ✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠ ✠ ✠

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The idea for this sermon was inspired by a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. David Petersen, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church of Fort Wayne, Indiana.