

The Little Gospel

John 3:1-17

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Pentecost

What draws the lessons together today is love. It is a very difficult matter because our culture is full of talk about love. If you look at the media, it's all about: What is love? How does love work?

How do we keep from having the culture determine what it means?

We can see the problem in Bible camp songs: "Love, love, love, that's what it's all about." And "they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love." And then there are those plaques on the wall: "God is love." That is said in 1 John 4:8, but what does it mean? That becomes a problem.

C.S. Lewis in his day job was a professor of English at the University of Cambridge in England, covering the time of 1066 until the time of Shakespeare about 1543, those 400 years called the Middle Ages. And there was that whole theme in English literature about lords and ladies, knights, and chivalrous way of approaching life.

One of the many books he wrote is titled, *The Four Loves*, in which he tried to spell out, not making it a matter of dictionary definitions, the different kinds of love. In the New Testament there are four words for love in Greek, and we translate them all with the one word, love, which becomes very confusing.

One of them is the kind of love you have for a nice, old pair of shoes, that kind of affection for something you really like.

Then there is the romantic love between a man and a woman, erotic love.

Third, there is a different word again for friendship. That kind of sharing and commonality.

Finally, a word that can be very much misunderstood, agape, which is a kind of love which only God has, which is totally for the other person, which is selfless.

These four words can be mixed up in our minds because of our culture, and also because our language doesn't allow for this to be translated simply. You have to have a whole phrase or sentence. Translators often don't do that.

On top of that we have the way we try to put God in a box. There's a book called *God in the Box*, and the whole theme is to say you don't want to confine God, which is true, but, on the other hand, as a little girl said to her mother: "God can't be everywhere; he has to be somewhere."

We also realize that God has put himself in a box. God has put himself in a very specific way and defined himself for us. We struggle with this because our words and concepts slip and slide, and we have no way to work, except to work with words and thoughts. It becomes particular, but it also floats back and forth.

I can say the word "cow" and you may have in mind a brown cow, someone else may have in mind a black and white cow, but the fact is that God is not limited and defined by this kind of thinking. He is not defined by thoughts. He created ideas, forms, and thoughts. We can end up with such foolishness as God is love and love is God. We manipulate and move it around and make love whatever suits us and what suits the culture.

Over against that is John 3:16, what is sometimes called The Little Gospel: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

What it does as it goes on is not very nice; it's not tolerant, not affirming. In fact, it's fierce: "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the light" (John 3:18-19).

That's a note of judgment, conflict, and a battle. Nor is it only there. In John 1:5: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

There is that battle between the world, as this is used in the Gospel of John, and the light, the coming of the Lord to us.

It is important to see that this is not an isolated verse. It is found also in John 8:12: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." It's a battle; it's light and darkness.

And in John 12:46: "I have come as light into the world, and whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." There's that conflict, that separation, which is found throughout the Gospel of John, between light and darkness, between the world and what the Lord is doing, as the language is used there.

But it isn't only between the world and us who are in the world with God. It's also God against God. That's what is decisive. In Matthew (26:39), Luke (22:42), and Mark (14:36) there is that struggle before the end, where it says he prayed: "Lord, if possible, may this cup be removed from me, but not my will but your will be done." There you have God against God struggling as to what it is about.

We do not solve that problem. It's very tempting for us to say: "We know then in the Trinity how it was all sorted out, how God's justice and God's love worked it out together."

There is a real temptation for us to think that we can get into the mind of the Trinity, into the God who is the God of all. What we know of God and who God is, is what he did in Jesus Christ, and anything else is, as Luther said, of the devil (Smalcald III/VIII/10; Tappert 313). We know who God is because he solved the problem of sin, death, and the devil by dying on the cross and rising again. That's what it is as an answer and all other answers that we cook up—that it has to be this way, or it has to be that way—all of that is a temptation drawing us away from what it is really about.

This brings us back to C.S. Lewis and perhaps his best-known work, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In those stories the lion, Aslan, is the God figure who is large and terrifying, but equally magnificent and wise. He is the creator and one true king of the world of Narnia. He seems to be like Jesus Christ. C.S. Lewis himself said that the Chronicles of Narnia are not an allegory, not intended to be a one-to-one correspondence with the Biblical witness, but it is a parallel story. C.S. Lewis wants us to remember that what is real and what is decisive is what God has done here in Jesus Christ to change through his love that he dies and rises for us.

In John 3:14-15, there's a theme picked up from Numbers 21:9, where it says: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. . . ." There is an account in the Old Testament of the people who were ill and Moses was told to put up a stake with a bronze snake on it and those who looked to that were healed. Using that as a kind of foreshadowing of what happens in the New Testament, John 3:14-15 says: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

The Gospel of John picks that up again in 12:32: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." After the cross and resurrection, he then becomes the center, the focus, the Savior.

We come back then in the Gospel of John, to the matter of whether "it's up to us to believe, to choose God." No, the Gospel of John says no; it's not up to us make a decision, to choose. John 1:13 talks about the children of God as those: "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." In other words, not because of our decisions, our good works, not because of anything in us. This is also said in John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," and 6:65: "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father," and 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I choose you."

And he does that when he makes you his own in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He does this outside of us, in spite of us, because we are those who in our own ways are always confused. We always try to see through the world to God beyond; this is what God is about, and this is what salvation is about, but when it comes down to it, it's about what he does.

Therefore again in the Gospel of John in 14:6: "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me," which is parallel to Acts 4:12, which says in a similar way: "There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

We conclude then, as Paul writes at the end of Romans 8: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen