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Sermon: December 22, 2013
Beverly E.C.C, Chicago, IL

“LOVE”

John 3:16; Luke 2:8-18, 36-38; Matthew 2:1-11

■ {Jn 3:16} “**For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**”

“**For God so loved.**” At its source, *αγαπη* [agapē] love depends not on kinship, common heritage, shared values, or personal attraction, but on deliberate choice. It is humble, selfless and sacrificial, and it seeks life and wholeness and peace for the beloved.

○ {Rev 7:9} “**For God so loved the world.**” Inspired by the Holy Spirit, John speaks of humanity in its totality, each human community and all individuals of “**every nation, tribe, people and language.**”

○ {Ro 5:7} “**For God so loved the world**” is even more amazing than it sounds, for Christmas leads inevitably to Good Friday. “**God demonstrates his... love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**”

○ “**Sinners**” does not just mean scofflaws or offenders; it is a synonym for enemies of God. As we learn in Romans 8:7, “**The sinful mind is hostile to God,**” it actively fears and hates and rebels against God.

These are the ones to whom God sent his Son! This is the world into which Christ was born! This is what is involved when John claims that “**God so loved**”!

“**For God so loved the world.**” We know these words. We recite them from memory.

? But *do we* actually *believe* that “**God so loved the world**”? More to the point: confessing (as we do) that God’s personal attributes never change, do you and I believe that God loves each human being who has existed, exists now, or will exist in the future?

☑ In 2011 a megachurch pastor stood before his congregation of 10,000 and declared: “**Some of you, God hates you. Some of you, God is sick of you... God has suffered long enough with you.**”

I viewed seven minutes of that sermon online. The preacher did not say, ‘*God hates your sin, God is sick of your immorality and injustice and idolatry, God has suffered long enough with your hypocrisy*’; he said: “**God hates you.**”

? What about us? *Do we believe that God still and always loves our species without exception?*

☑ The members of Westboro Baptist Church don’t. They carry signs that read, “God hates _____.” I have visited their website. They quote a lot of Scripture passages, but – surprise, surprise – John 3:16 is not one of them.

I know some believers who speak as though God loves everyone *except* Moslems or Progressives or Tea-Partiers or drug pushers or some other category of people. (Isn’t it interesting that when we presume to exclude a whole group from God’s love, it is always one from which we can easily distance ourselves?)

? What about us? *Do we believe God loves those whose beliefs or lifestyle are repugnant to us?*

☑ There are some Christians to whom these illustrations do not apply in the slightest degree. They believe, in the most literal and expansive terms, that “**God so loved**”/so loves “**the world.**”

And yet there is that one person whom they hate. It has nothing to do with mother tongue, skin color, voting record, moral views, or religious faith; it is a special case. That individual wounded them terribly, without justification, perhaps without remorse. When they look at him or her they do not see a human, they see a monster. The idea that God loves their adversary turns their stomach.

? What about us? *Do we believe that God loves our personal enemies?*

■ “**For God so – loved - the - world, that he gave his one and only Son.**”

? *Might we struggle to believe that God so loves the world because we struggle to believe that God so loves us?* Speaking for myself, I am less inclined to love other sinners when I am relying on my correct belief, moral decency, and good works to earn God’s love, instead of relying on God to give me *αγαπη* love regardless of my worthiness.

My prayer is that kind and merciful God will fill us with such faith and trust in his love for *us* that we will be empowered and inspired to “**so [love]**” human communities and individuals of “**every nation, tribe, people and language**” – *especially* those who are to us the least loveable.

This is where Christ’s birth narratives come in. As we review them, let’s be attentive to whom God “**gave his one and only Son**” that first Christmas.

■ In Luke 2:8-18 an angel appears to some shepherds and announces the “**good news of great joy that will be for all the people.**” These shepherds “[hurry] off and [find] **Mary...Joseph, and the baby,**” and after “**they [have] seen him they spread the word... about this child.**”

☑ {Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 25b} It is a *shocking* demonstration of divine love, for shepherds are commonly considered to be what we might call “JĒNOs” – Jews in Name Only. Their work prevents them from sticking to the dietary laws, purity laws, and Sabbath laws around which first century Jews structure their lives. On top of that, many of them are liars and thieves. As a group they are so untrustworthy that their testimony is officially inadmissible in a court of law.

Yet the LORD has ordained that, aside from Mary and Joseph, these shepherds are the first to look upon the infant Messiah! Not only so, they are the very first human beings to go and witness that “**a Savior has been born**”!

■ “**God so loved**” (so loves) the despised of “**the world that he gave his one and only Son**” for them!

■ Later, on the fortieth day after Christmas, the Holy Family goes to the Temple to be ritually purified after childbirth. In Luke 2:36-38 a “**very old**” female prophet named **Anna** approaches them, “[gives] **thanks to God and [speaks] about the child to all who [are] looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.**”

○ {Job 27:15; Lam 1:1; Ruth 1:21} Anna is a widow. She has never remarried even though she was young when her husband died, which suggests that she is poor or childless or both. In first century Palestine widowhood is all about weeping, desolation, and poverty.

Everyone who looks at Anna sees a barren old woman without a future. Some wonder what she did wrong to be punished so harshly. She is the person many of us pity, but no one wants to be.

Yet the LORD bestows upon Anna the privilege of beholding the Messiah in the flesh and prophesying about the salvation he will bring!

■ **“God so loved”** (so loves) the pathetic of **“the world that he gave his one and only Son” for them!**

○ That brings us to Matthew 2:1-11, the account of the wise men.

☑ They have detailed knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures, most likely handed down from Daniel during the Exile. But make no mistake: they are gentiles. An overwhelming majority of ancient Jews regards all gentiles as filthy, immoral, unclean dogs and do not hesitate to call them that. First century Jewish males begin each day by praying, **“Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has created me a human and not a beast, a man and not a woman, an Israelite and not a gentile.”**

To make matters worse they are Magi, priests of a false religion called Zoroastrianism. They use astrology to interpret signs in the heavens, and Scripture forbids this as idolatry.

Put it all together and these men exemplify the unworthy, the contemptible, the unfit, the scum of the earth who are so low you have to dig up to bury them. Regardless of their personal virtues they embody the enemy, the oppressor, the alien.

Yet the LORD, the God of Israel, has ordained that these gentile Magi should seek and find and worship the Messiah – and without making themselves acceptable by first converting to Judaism!

■ **“God so loved”** (so loves) the unworthy of **“the world that he gave his one and only Son” for them!**

■ {Jn 3:16} **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”**

○ {Php 2:6-7} The enfleshment of God the Son is the first and greatest Christmas gift. He,

being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

This, in and of itself, is indisputable proof of God’s deliberate, humble, selfless, sacrificial $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\eta$ love that seeks life and wholeness and peace for all humanity.

○ {Php 2:8} But the incarnation does not stand on its own:

**And being found in appearance as a human
being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!**

**“God demonstrates his... love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

May he fill us with such faith and trust in his love for
us that we will be empowered and inspired to “**so [love]**”
human communities and individuals of “**every nation,
tribe, people and language.**”

Merry Christmas!