

John 3:16

Three days ago approximately three billion people received Valentine's Day cards. Considering that only six or seven countries celebrate Valentine's Day, the odds that you received one are pretty good. Most are sent by women; eighty-five percent, in fact. And, of course, almost all valentines have pictures of hearts and contain sentimental messages. We're not even sure how Valentine's Day began. There are several theories dating back hundreds of years. And it cannot be proven that St. Valentine had anything to do with the day that bears his name. But people don't care about that. For many, Valentine's Day is simply a day for romance; for giving flowers and candy. Some wait until February 14th to propose to their sweetheart. Others wait to get married on this day. You ask the average person which day of the year most symbolizes love, and the answer you will get is "Valentine's Day."

Because our ideas about love are shaped by human sentimentality, we tend to understand God's love in the same way. "For God so loved the world" our text tells us, and we may think, "That's nice." It warms our heart to hear such sentimental words. But John 3:16 is not God's valentine to you. It's not a card covered with lace and decorated with hearts. You will never find a Valentine's Day card which contains the phrase: "I loved you." The words are always in the present, not in the past tense. But God's word to you here is that He loved you—"For God so loved the world." How? By giving His only Son to die for you. Long before there ever was a Valentine's Day, God loved you within His heart. And this was no sentimental love. God didn't have "feelings" for you. He had real love, and that love centered around you.

In looking at John 3:16 we need to pay special attention to the verbs. Verbs express action, and that describes God's love best. His love for you caused Him to take action on your behalf. The first verb is "loved." Who loved? God loved. What did He love? God loved the world. Why did He love the world? Because the world hated Him. Valentine's Day love is between two people who love each other, or at least like each other; but that love in no way describes God's love for us. God loved us, writes the Apostle Paul, "While we were His enemies."

Most boys at a school dance are afraid to go over and ask a pretty girl to dance with them. They're afraid of being rejected. The wonder of God's love is that He loved us in spite of the fact that we rejected His love. Jesus didn't hide His face from those who hated Him. He was despised and rejected, yet He came to His own even though His own received Him not. God's love for you is not based upon your love toward Him. If it was, we would have a moody God. Some days He would love us; other days He would hate us. According to the new man in us given us in our baptism, we love God. But our sinful flesh can't stand Him and hates to hear His Word to us. God did not love you because He knew that you would become His baptized child. He did not love you because He saw that you would come to church and sing hymns to Him. God loved you because you were His enemy. He loved you because you were a sinner lost in your sins.

And because He loved you He gave His only Son for you. "Gave" is our second verb. On Valentine's Day a lot of giving goes on. Most of us have finished off our Christmas goodies by then and so we go to the store and buy chocolate, candy, and more chocolate. The giving of gifts at Valentine's Day is a tradition that will never die. We give nice things

to those who are near and dear to our hearts. But God gave His only Son in order to bring you near to His heart. You weren't His "sweetheart" when He loved you. As we heard, by nature we were against Him. But that's why God gave His Son for you. The only way to bring you to Him was to send Jesus to the cross for you.

Valentine's Day is about sweet things, nice things, sentimental things. We like to talk about our love in such ways. But God's love can be described as a "bloody kiss," because we cannot speak about God's love without speaking about the cross and Jesus' blood shed there for you. God gave His Son for you because you and I were headed for an eternity in hell. Jesus suffered that eternity in hell in your place. Not only was He rejected by us; His Heavenly Father rejected Him because He was bearing the burden of your sin.

Husbands and wives, sweethearts, and family members tell each other, "I love you." As your pastor I have love for you, just as you have love for each other. God does more than tell you of His love for you—He shows you His bloody hands which were nailed to a cross for you; He reveals His heart which was pierced through for you. You won't have to wonder if God will still love you years from now; if He will still love you when you continue to sin against Him. He sealed His love for you with a kiss—a bloody kiss. And because through Holy Baptism that blood of Christ was sprinkled on your head, you always remain the object of His love.

Do you believe this? "Believe" is the third verb in John 3:16..."Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Most people mess up here. They allow God to have the first two verbs, but they want to control the third one. "God loved and God gave, but I believe," as if God did His part and now I have to do mine. But faith is never our part of the bargain. There is no bargain. It all comes from God. Faith is His gift to you... Ephesians 2 is clear about this. If you believe that God loved you so that He gave His only Son for you, then God Himself has worked this faith within your heart.

We can reject Jesus. We can grow weary of hearing His Word and walk away from Him. We can become too busy for Him. But we cannot come to Him unless God draws us in faith. We cannot remain in Christ unless God, through His Word and Sacraments, keeps us with Christ in the one, true Faith. Faith is not knowledge. Faith is not knowing what God did on the cross. If faith was knowledge then the devil would have faith. He knows full well what happened on Calvary. Faith is a gift that God works, as He pleases, in those who hear His Word of Grace in Jesus Christ. Do not ever worry about whether or not you have faith. Just keep coming to hear the words of Christ. As He preaches His Word into your ears He places faith into your heart.

From start to finish John 3:16 is about what God did and does for you. Maybe you celebrated Valentine's Day, or maybe you didn't. But there is something greater than Valentine's Day here. Here in these words there is life for you. Eternal life is what He promises to you. And here at this altar the very Jesus who gives you these words of life gives you here a bloody kiss. He gives you His body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins.

Valentine's Day can't touch that. Your God forgives you...not because you're nice and loving to Him. He forgives you because you used to be His enemy, but His Son died for

you. God forgives you even though you and I had rejected Him. He forgives you even though you and I have not shown much love toward Him.

Will you now? Show love to Him? Don't walk away from here this morning without the desire and intention to love Him who loved you. Don't walk out of here thinking that you've heard enough about God's love to last you for a few months. His love for you is not out there; it's here in His words of forgiveness and life; His love is here covered with bread and wine. Because God loved you and gave His Son for you, and because you believe this...you can leave His House today in peace and joy; and you can leave desiring and intending to love Him by loving your neighbor; and you can leave knowing that each time you return here, He is always here for you to give you more and more of His wondrous love in Jesus Christ. Amen.