

Surprised by Love
Christmas Day – Sunday, Dec. 25, 2011
Luke 2: 1-20 & John 3: 16
By Dean Feldmeyer

Most people know the Reduced Shakespeare Company for the play they began with, “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged).” (Also called “The Comp. Wks. Of Wm. Shkspr. Abridgd.”) When they perform this masterwork, they literally do severely abridged comic versions of all of William Shakespeare’s plays in about 120 minutes.

They began doing this in 1981 and so successful have they become that they have added several other “Complete Works” to their repertoire.

There’s “The History of America (Abridged).” And there’s “Western Civilization: The Complete Musical (Abridged).” And there’s “The Complete World of Sports (Abridged),” and “All the Great Books (Abridged).” Last year they added “The Ultimate Christmas Show (Abridged).”

My favorite, however, is “The Bible: The Complete Word of God (Abridged).”

Jean and I went to see them perform that one a few years ago and the three-man troop was true to their motto: “Fast. Funny. Physical.”

When they got to the story of David and Goliath, one guy portrayed David, one guy portrayed Goliath and the third guy pulled people from the audience up onto the stage to portray the Philistine army and the Army of Israel. The story went along pretty much as you’d expect with the guys drawing all the comedy they could from a story that has already been parodied a thousand times. But the surprise for me, came when David slew Goliath.

As directed, the Philistines groaned and quaked in fear as their leader fell to the ground. And the Army of Israel cheered and waved “Terrible Towels” and held up signs with the CBS eye on them and one guy, in the back held up a sign that read “John 3:16.”

When I saw that I laughed so hard that I think I embarrassed Jean.

It just cracked me up. For one, it was such an obvious anachronism -- a thing out of its proper time. And, secondly, it was such a statement about our own time and the nature of Christianity in 20th century America. In our excitement to spread the word about God’s self-sacrificial loving kindness, we hold up a vague, printed reference at a professional football game where our culture celebrates physical violence, aggression, and brutality almost as a religion.

I don’t know if they still do that, hold up the John 3:16 signs at football games, but I remember seeing them and wondering just how effective they were or if the person holding up the sign had any way of measuring its effectiveness. I remember thinking how silly it was to be waving it around in that kind of venue under those kinds of circumstances.

If I were going to post a sign reading John 3:16 anywhere, it wouldn’t be at a Bengals game.

I think it would be on top of the stable at a nativity scene. In fact, that sign should be a part of every nativity scene. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”** (NRSV) Everyone’s memory verse, pretty much the way I learned it in Sunday school.

But I also love Eugene Peterson’s more informal translation: **“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”**

On this day, as we celebrate his birth, let’s us take just a few minutes to consider the full ramifications of what God was doing when he gave us his son, as he did.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

“First of all,” the gospel writer, John, tells us, “This is a story about God’s love.”

It is not, a story about stables or shepherds or wise men even about Mary and Joseph. All those things appear in the story but the story isn’t about them. They are characters and props or sets that help tell the story of God’s love.

And let’s also be clear that the story is about God’s love. Not yours or mine or Mary’s or the shepherds’ or anyone’s but God.

Secondly, the love in this story is God’s love for “the whole world.”

God, we are told, loved the world. Not the Jews. Not the Christians. Not the rich people or the poor people or the straight people or the gay people or the conservatives or the liberals or the attractive or the homely or the fat or the thin or the Americans or the Chinese or the Europeans. God loved the whole world. Everyone. All of them.

Remember the angels back at the shepherds’ camp? What did they say to the shepherds after the “Be not afraid,” part? “For behold I bring you good news of great joy” for whom? For “all people!” That’s right.

Oh, my brothers and sisters, if we miss everything else about the Christmas story, if we are so caught up in sales and gifts and tinsel and carols and lights and trees and everything that is the cultural celebration we call Christmas, let us not miss this one simple yet vital message – that Jesus Christ is given by God to the whole world, to all people.

There is no test you have to pass. There is no oath you have to swear. There is no doctrine you have to accept and believe. There is no uniform, no password, no secret handshake, no norm you have to uphold. You don't even have to believe in Christmas.

You don't have to earn it. You don't have to be bad or good. God isn't making a list and checking it twice. He is simply loving you... and everyone else.

How much is he loving you?

THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON

He's loves us so much that he gave his only son to prove it.

Now let's pause for just a moment to talk about this "only son," thing. Back two thousand years ago, in the first century, in Palestine and Judea, the notion of an only son carried with it a whole lot of baggage that it might not, necessarily carry today.

In first century Hebrew families the entire inheritance went to the oldest son whose responsibility it was to increase the family's holdings and take care of the rest of the family. Should the oldest son pre-decease the parents, the second oldest son became the oldest son and so on down the line.

Younger sons, in other words, served as back-up's, "Plan B's" for the oldest sons. If a family had only one son that was because that was all the sons they could have. The entire future, all of the hopes and dreams of the entire family fell upon that one son.

For a father to put his only son at risk was very rare, indeed. For a father to send his only son into harm's way was not heard of. For a father to sacrifice his only son for some greater good was simply not done. There was, in Hebrew society, no greater good. The family, the future of the family, the inheritance that would support the family, these were the foundational values of Hebrew culture. There was no love greater than a father's love for an only son. Period.

So, when we say that God so loved the world that he "gave his only son," we are saying that God's love was greater than any love that people in that culture had ever experienced. It was a love so full, so profound, so rich and perfect that all other loves paled in comparison.

This, for the gospel writer, John, is how he expresses a superlative that is beyond expression.

How high is up? How big is enormous? How much love is God capable of?

John answers that question this way: God's love is bigger, higher, greater than a love of a father for an only son.

SO THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM

And God's love has a purpose. It is not simply affection – warm feelings toward someone. It is not just amiability or amicability – the ability to get along with or work with someone. It is not *eros* or *philia* – lust or friendship.

God's love is purposeful. God has a goal in mind for us. God wants something for us.

We'll get to that in a moment, but first John tells us how it is that we get what God wants for us.

There are three kinds of believing when it comes to people:

First, we believe things about a person. We believe that a person is what others say about that person. We can believe what is written about that person in books. We can believe what traditions have been given to us about that person.

Then, we can believe a person. That is, we accept what they say as true.

And, finally, can also believe in a person.

To believe in a person is to believe the person and to believe certain things about that person. But it is more. It is also to believe to such a degree that we place our trust in that person. We have FAITH in that person. We are willing to take risks based on our knowledge of and relationship with that person.

At the risk of embarrassing him, let me illustrate this point using Steven Haines as my example.

When I first came here, ten years ago, I was told lots of things about Steven before I even met him. I was told what a gifted musician, composer and director he was. I was told that he had a background not just in music but in theater. I was told that he was a creative and enthusiastic worship leader in this church and that we, as a church, were lucky to have him.

Soon I met Steve and we were able to share with each other our love of music and theater and swap some directors' war stories. His knowledge of church music and worship repertoire was superior to my own and, after a few Sundays, I realized that his interpretive skills were excellent.

So it didn't take long until I had moved through all three levels of belief. First, I believed about Steve. Then I believed Steve. Now I believe in Steve. I trust him. I trust his skill, his judgment, his sensitivity. And I'm willing to risk with him. I'm willing to let go of my control of every moment of the worship hour and say, to Steve: "It's all yours."

We all go through this kind of evolution in our relationships with other people, don't we?

With our friends, our colleagues, our neighbors, our family – we grow in our relationships through believing about, to believing, to believing in.

And that is all God is asking of us concerning Jesus. He asks us to have a full and complete relationship with Jesus. He asks us to not get stuck along the way, believing about but not in Jesus.

He asks us to go through that childhood phase wherein we learn about and believe things that others have told us about Jesus – childhood stories, Sunday school, youth fellowship, confirmation, Bible study, etc.

Then, he asks us to move to that second plateau wherein we learn and believe not just things about Jesus, but Jesus himself. He asks us to become “Red Letter” Christians who listen to what Jesus has to say and take it seriously.

And then, he asks us to grow and mature into that adult type of relationship with Jesus wherein we don’t just believe things about him and we don’t just believe what he says but we believe IN him. We allow him to mold and shape our lives. We trust him. We have faith in him. We are willing to risk ridicule, failure, even death because we trust him and have faith in him. We believe IN him.

This is the goal and purpose that God, in his love, has in mind for us.

SHALL NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

You know, I love my children and I have loved them from the moment of their birth and every day of their lives. But the love I have had, and continue to have for them, goes beyond that shallow affection where I just get warm feelings from looking at them and being around them – though, certainly, I do.

My love for them includes hopes and dreams and desires for them as well. I want for them to be successful and happy and to know the satisfaction of a meaningful and satisfying life that gives to the world more than it takes.

I want my kids to live...fully. I want them to live...authentically. I want them to live...robustly.

I want them to live their lives not on the temporal plane only but on the eternal plane as well.

I want them to have life that is eternal not just in the horizontal sense but in the vertical sense. Not just in the chronological sense where days are added to days in endless succession, but in the qualitative sense where life has depth and meaning,

And that is what God wants for us.

God wants more than that we are born, live for a while, follow all the rules, and then die.

God wants us to live qualitatively, authentically, fully, eternally.

And, John says, God wants that for us so sincerely, so totally, so deeply, that he was willing to give us his only son just to prove it. And if we believe IN that son, if we accept the gift that he is for us, then that life will be ours.

And our every Christmas will be merry, indeed.

AMEN