

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 10, 2024 (4th Sunday in Lent, Year B)
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

I want to share something with you about myself. It's a little personal, but I'll bet many of you can relate to this. I'm 52 years old now, and I'm still waiting for my father to tell me that he loves me for the first time. When I was growing up, he NEVER, EVER said, "I love you" or "I'm proud of you." Not once. It just isn't his way. I know, deep down, he DOES love me and he's proud of me, but just ONCE, I'd like to HEAR those words. I know many of YOU know EXACTLY what I mean.

Sometimes we ACT like we DON'T need to hear the words, but we DO. There's a story about an old married couple. They'd been married for over 50 years! And one day the wife gets fed up. She goes to her husband and says, "I've had it. I can't take it any more. In all these years, you've never ONCE said that you loved me." And the man says, "Well, SURE I have." But she holds her ground and says, "No, you never have, not once." And he says, "Well, I TOLD you I loved you when we got MARRIED, and if anything CHANGES, I'll LET ya KNOW."

We may ACT like we don't need to hear "I love you," BUT WE DO. We need to hear it as OFTEN as POSSIBLE.

Jesus says that people HIDE from the light, because they PREFER the DARKNESS. I think that A LOT of people prefer the darkness, because they've JUST GOTTEN USED to darkness. Sometimes the darkness is so DEEP, that HIDING from the LIGHT is all they can do to PROTECT themselves. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

You may remember YEARS AGO the movie "Good Will Hunting." There's a scene in the movie where Robin Williams' character, Shawn, is counseling Matt Damon's character, Will. They're talking about how they had EACH been ABUSED as children. Will shares how his foster dad would come home DRUNK and lay objects on the table, like a belt and a wrench, and make Will CHOOSE what he'd be BEATEN with that night. And Shawn says, "Will, you KNOW that none of this was your FAULT, right." And Will says, "Yeah, I know that." And Shawn walks closer and gently says, "It's not your fault." And Will STIFFENS up and tries to say matter-of-factly "I know." But Shawn says, "No, you DON'T, Will. It's not your fault." And Will starts to get angry, and YELLS and pushes him, but Shawn keeps saying "It's not your fault. It's not your fault." And eventually, Will breaks down and he CRIES, he cries like he NEVER had before, like a LITTLE BOY who had been BEATEN, like the boy he had NEVER been ALLOWED to BE. He knew in his HEAD that it wasn't his fault, but he had never BELIEVED it in his HEART.

There are some things we need to HEAR OVER and OVER again, before we can start to BELIEVE them: It's not your fault; I believe in you; I trust you; I forgive you. And like our children and our husbands our wives, we need to hear the words, "I LOVE you" ALL the TIME.

We need to hear that GOD loves us too. That's why God gave us his Son, so he could SHOW us his love. That's why God gave us his Spirit, so he can be WITH us all the time. That's why God gave us his Word and the Sacraments, so we can KNOW, AND FEEL, AND TOUCH his love. And that's why we have WORSHIP every week, to hear that we are loved.

Now some MAY think, "Hey, I'm a pretty GOOD person. I learned what I NEEDED in Sunday school. I go to church. God knows I believe. If anything CHANGES, I'll let him know." But it's hard to have a RELATIONSHIP with ANYONE, INCLUDING GOD, if we hardly TALK, OR LISTEN, to them. The truth is that we need to HEAR God say "I love you" as OFTEN as possible.

(Show John 3:16 on screen)

And that's WHY John 3:16 is the most well-known verse in the whole Bible. Say it with me – you know it: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” You KNOW that verse, because it's GOD SPEAKING RIGHT to your heart; it's God SAYING, “I love you.”

A story, a TRUE story:

In Mount Sterling, Missouri lives a man named Emil Leimkuehler. One day he went down to the coffee shop and got to talking with old Gus Richter. Gus told a story that he used to have an old tractor, a 1917 International Harvester Titan, but he sold it to the Barite open pit mine. It did its duty of pumping rain and seep water out of the mine for a number of years, until the great depression made the mine unprofitable, and it shut down. Over the years, the pit had gradually filled with water. But the mine company had no more USE for that old tractor, so they had just LEFT it down there, and some 40 years later, it was STILL down there under 65 feet of water.

Now this got Emil thinking. He wanted that old tractor. But first he had to find it. Now, if you haven't figured it out by his name, Emil Leimkuehler was German, and (I'm half German so I'm allowed to say this) Germans are notoriously cheap. Instead of hiring divers to find the tractor, Emil went fishing for it. He sank a large hook down to the bottom of the pit and trolled back and forth with his boat for days. Of course, he DIDN'T find it, so he had to break down and hire the divers anyway. Two divers were unsuccessful, and one of them said, “I think you must have bought an empty hole.” But Germans are also notoriously stubborn, and Emil wasn't about to give up, so he hired a 3rd diver, and HE FOUND it.

Emil made arrangements for a crane to lift out the old tractor, but when the cables were attached to the lifting boom, even with the boom fully extended, the crane needed to sit right up to the EDGE of the pit, to avoid DRAGGING the antique tractor along the rocky bottom.

Both the crane operator and the scuba diver asked, “Do you think you will be able to salvage enough iron and parts to PAY for this operation?” But Emil told them they'd understand LATER.

Now all the while, back at the coffee shop, they were making fun of Emil. He was wasting time, and, worse, he was wasting MONEY. The tractor was worthless. Even if he got it OUT, it would be RUSTY AND USELESS.

(Show picture of the Titan tractor.)

But Emil DID rescue it. After 40 years in a watery grave, the old tractor finally broke the surface and came to light. It was in rough shape, but he started to work on it right away.

(Show picture of the Titan tractor 2.)

It took him 3 years to restore the old tractor, but when he was finished, it looked brand new. Like this.

(Show picture of the Titan tractor 3.)

Emil took it around the country to show it off and tell its story. Now, people understand. It wasn't FOR MONEY; it was a labor of LOVE.

Can you IMAGINE a LOVE and a DETERMINATION SO STRONG that it was willing to go down into a PIT to SAVE a WORTHLESS PIECE of JUNK? (Advance slide.)

God can. GOD HAS. TWICE in our reading from Ephesians, it says that we were DEAD through our sins and trespasses. We were worthless. But God SO LOVED us, and SO WANTED us ANYWAY, that Jesus was willing to DIE, and go down into the pit of HELL to SAVE us.

I was once in an arcade, where they had an area with a big sign that said, “Redemption Center.” The idea is that you bring over your tickets from the games, and they trade them for toys.

The TRUTH is, you're trading pieces of PAPER for WORTHLESS JUNK. That's what WE call REDEMPTION in this world.

Here's REAL redemption. We come to GOD with NOTHING. NO, GOD comes to US, and OFFERS to TAKE our BROKEN LIVES and WORTHLESS SINS and, in EXCHANGE, GIVE us ... EVERYTHING – SALVATION, HOPE, JOY, PEACE, ETERNAL LIFE!

HEAR his words again: "For God SO LOVED the world that he GAVE his only Son, so that EVERYONE who BELIEVES in him may NOT PERISH but HAVE ETERNAL LIFE."

What an AMAZING GIFT this is, COMPLETELY UNDESERVED. You are redeemed. You are FORGIVEN. YOU ARE LOVED. Amen.