

Numbers 21:4-9 Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10 John 3:14-21

Let me ask you a question. Have you ever tried to initiate a relationship with someone who didn't seem much interested in responding? Or the converse could be true: has someone else shown an interest in you and you just didn't feel quite the same way, so you didn't respond? We all know what those two feelings are like because in all probability we've all been on both sides of this equation. At the risk of anthropomorphizing God, let's assume that our gospel lesson this morning is all about relationship and life. God wants to have a relationship with us...each one of us...and we may or may not...be interested in responding. You see, God wants to offer us a fullness of life...the kind of life that we have probably never even imagined...even in our deepest longings...and God wants it to begin in this life. We may not be sure that's what we want. Dealing with what we know is always more comfortable than dealing with the unknown. Some of us are pretty skittish about the unknown. Probably the most worn-out and over exposed soundbite in Christianity appears in the gospel lesson this morning. It's John 3:16. Even if you don't know the exact words of this Bible verse almost everyone recognizes the scriptural address. John 3:16 appears on bumper stickers, on placards at protests, in shop windows, in the endzone at football games and in any other place that attracts people's attention. This one passage captures the entirety of the Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." We very often think of this passage as describing the quantity of God's love... "so much"... when in fact the Greek word "houtos" may be translated not as 'so much' but more accurately as 'in this way'. Sending His own Son is the way that God loved the world. It's not so much a matter of quantity as it is a matter of method. Sending Jesus into the world is how God saved the world. Throughout the Scripture from creation to the end of time, we learn of God's love for all of creation. It was love that stirred God's heart at the pleading of the slaves in Egypt and it was love that brought them out of Egypt through the Red Sea. It was love that offered them both guidance and sustenance in the wilderness. It was God's love that raised up the prophets who spoke to the people on God's behalf about injustice and care for the foreigners. It was divine love that carried Israel through the exile in Babylon. And it was God that was praised with 2 singing and palms when the Temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt. The entirety of scripture is about the love affair between God and his people. And now, the Son of God, Jesus, has taken human form so that this relationship will not only be enhanced, but will be expanded. Jesus didn't come to save only the Chosen People. He came to save all of creation and everybody in it. He came to show us and to teach us that God's love isn't only for those who look like us and think like us and dress like us and talk like us. It is also for those we see as enemies and those who persecute us and for those among us who are oppressed. It was the first century church, after all, who embraced the Gentiles and opened the doors to those whose very existence was troubling: the blind, the disabled, the mute, and the eunuchs. But even now

in our own day, established powers seek to limit God's love by excluding others from full participation in the community. God's not excluding anyone. People are doing that. And yet, in our own time, God raises up prophets to declare God's love for all people, regardless of age or race or nationality or creed or gender or sexual orientation. Scripture never says God loves all of creation, except.....there are no exceptions in God's love for all. The writer of the gospel of John says on the one hand, "Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The Son came to save, to grant eternal life because God loved the world that much. That was Jesus' announcement. "I'm here," Jesus says, "because the God who loved you of old, still does. He sent me to tell you, to show you, to gather you up into life with him forever." But what about belief? Where does belief fit into this picture? Belief is more than just saying "I believe." Believing is an action. To believe is to obey. Belief is not just assent to a propositional statement or the recitation of the Creed. Belief is an internalizing of the love that God offers. It is the response that is given in the light of God's gesture to redeem the world through Jesus. The ones who don't believe are simply the ones who have not yet accepted the gift or the invitation. We humans pass judgement on each other about this sort of thing all the time. Not believing does not mean that a person is inherently evil. We all know that evil exists in every single one of us...those who believe and those who do not. We are all mixtures of both good and evil in varying degrees. Sometimes, not accepting the gift by believing and obeying is simply easier than saying what many of us truly believe which is "I'm not worthy." Not accepting the invitation does not mean that God has condemned us. God loves us no matter what. Not accepting the invitation means we cut ourselves off from the life-giving love God is offering us. Nobody is doing that to us. We're doing it to ourselves. And we all know that simply professing to believe is not enough. Our actions must reflect our belief and our obedience to God. We all know of situations in which people with power and authority...sometimes within the church itself...have used that power and authority to abuse vulnerable people badly...all the while professing to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Light of the world. That's not obedience. The gift God has given us in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus is overwhelming to say the least. But accepting that gift by believing is the beginning of eternal life here and now. Living in eternal life is not about the quantity of life we are given; it simply means that one is living in the presence of God and that can begin in this life when we accept the gift and when we make the decision to believe. And it is a decision. It doesn't happen by magic. By sending Jesus into the world, God precipitated a crisis. In the person of Jesus we are confronted with the living God. We are asked to make a choice. Neutrality is not an option. You either want to live in the light or you don't. Living in the light means what we say about what we believe has to match the actions we take and the decisions we make as believers. But here's a good question for all of us: What if God's love is not actually in short supply and offered only to the ones who have seen and confess Jesus as the Christ, but rather it is abundant and is poured out on the entire world? What would that mean for all of us? Only God knows for sure who has brought Jesus into their heart and feeds on him. They may not make a public statement in any way other than the way they choose to live their lives. But God knows. And God's the only one who needs to know. We are all mixtures

of good and evil. We all have a different reaction to the Light. It's not as simple as preferring the dark so that we can perform evil deeds. Sometimes that's not it at all. Sometimes the Light is simply overwhelming. Sometimes the Light is a little frightening. Sometimes we need time to get accustomed to the Light. Sometimes our failings are just too painful to look at in the Light. But the Light also illuminates. We 'see' with the Light! And the Light is also warm and inviting. It envelopes us with a true sense of safety. Jesus said many times, "Do not be afraid!" When we turn our eyes to the Light and accept our failings alongside God's love, we also see the cross where life is freely given. The love, the light and the life belong to God...and so does the judgment. That's not ours to make...on ourselves or on anyone else. Our job is to accept the gracious invitation from God to stand in the Light. If you remember nothing else on this day, remember this: You are part of God's creation and God loves you...no matter what!!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.