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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/20/2011, The Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 12:1-4, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

My old piano book has an introduction to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata that has intimidated me about playing that piece:

The great pianist Franz Liszt taught all of Beethoven's sonatas, but refused to hear any of his students play this one [the Moonlight Sonata], since he felt that it should be treated with utmost respect, and should be played only by the masters. He, himself, performed it frequently in his concerts, of course.¹

Alas, I could bring love to the piece, but not skill. I have banged away at the piece many times, but never with an easy conscience, haunted by the notion that if Franz Liszt heard me, he would be furious and scornful.

Well, that's rather how it is for the preacher when it comes to John 3:16. We tend to shy away from it, not from lack of love, but from a sense of unworthiness. How are we going to be able to improve upon these great words of our Lord, or even add to them without at the same time decreasing their majesty?

But in this sermon I am going to try to preach on John 3:16. There is something on my heart, and I find it easy to turn to that royal text when thinking about it.

By now, many of you have heard that my great predecessor, our former pastor Raymond C. Schulze, died this past Monday. It was not unexpected. We have been praying for him for months. Still, his death was the sort of sorrow that awakened me in the wee hours this week, with an intense mixture of grief at his passing, gratitude for the man, and joy at the hope of seeing him again some day on that far shore, where there is no more sorrow or dying and God himself wipes away the tears from every eye. Pastor Schulze's death will be a cause of grief for many of us, far and wide.

Let me tell you about Friday's funeral service for Raymond down in Florida. We are planning a memorial service for him here at Immanuel two Sundays from now. That will be Sunday, April 3 at 5 p.m. So, we will get to speak more about

¹ *Favorite Beethoven*. (Alfred Publishing Co., Inc, 1976)

Pastor Schulze then. But for now, let me share with you a brief report on his funeral two days ago.

The liturgy was beautiful, the sermon was very fine, and the celebration of the Holy Communion was moving. But for now, I want to speak simply of the prelude to the service, to the viewing. The viewing began in the narthex with prayers and sprinkling of Raymond's casket with baptismal water and then procession into the church with a hymn. By the way, at the end of the liturgy, the priest who had preached so well said that he intended to challenge his congregation on Sunday to "sing like the Lutherans." He was pleased with the joy and gusto of our little Lutheran band at this funeral.

So, Raymond's simple wooden casket was brought forward and set up before the altar. The casket lid was removed and people began to move forward to see Raymond for the last time till heaven. For two hours, the line moved forward to see Raymond. This was a service in the middle of the work day, but that congregation loved Raymond, and they took off work to be there for his funeral.

For me, it was a most eloquent sermon simply to watch brother and sister Christians come forward to view Raymond. You know that Raymond was always a slender man. By the time of his death, he was even more slender. But there he was, with a cross draped over his hands, which Margaret had placed there. There he was with black clergy shirt and collar. There he was with his shock of white hair and those heavy eyes, now closed in death, and all those features that were so dear to us.

But what was so very moving for me was to see the congregation simply come forward to see Raymond again, as if hungry to see him again, to touch him, to give him a kiss.

Some of the people in that line were themselves elderly and frail. At least one was in a life and death struggle with cancer. But all of those troubles seemed to be set aside and people looked upon Raymond with affection and with joy. Why joy? I'll tell you why. I'll tell you why they could look at death and not be appalled. It was because they believed this:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him *should not perish*, but have *everlasting life*.

Err long some of the people in that line will be with Raymond again. Indeed, who of us can swear that we will live for years to come? But it seemed to me that the people who came to the casket came there trusting in the grace of our God, and therefore hopeful of seeing their friend Raymond Schulze again with Christ.

Now, Raymond looked saintly lying there. He always looked saintly, both in life and death. That was just his way. But the great cause of hope for Ray was not that he looked saintly, but simply that he has a good Saviour. Listen again to the second verse of our text, John 3:17. It also is a magnificent verse:

¹⁷For God sent *not* his Son into the world *to condemn* the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:17, KJV)

Not to condemn! What a sweet teaching that is. How it must have lifted the heart of that one about to be stoned. She looked up. Those who had condemned her had quietly dropped their stones and walked away. And what did Jesus say to her?

¹⁰Jesus looked up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “*Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.*” (John 8:10-11, RSV)

If those words had been spoken simply by a friendly neighbor, they would have been music to the woman’s ears. Even greater that this, they were spoken by the One who is in charge, yea, in charge of everything!

There is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1, RSV)

Here we are, early in Lent. Behind us lies this year’s Epiphany Season, with its focus on our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount and the call to purity of heart and holiness of life. Before us lies the way of the Cross through Lent and Holy Week. Before us lies the living Example of purity of heart and holiness of life. I mean, our Lord Jesus as he walks on with steady step toward the Cross.

This particular Sunday is like a hinge between our Lord’s Sermon and our Lord’s Cross. This morning’s blessed Gospel, including John 3:16-17, is an oasis in the journey. It is a chance to pause and to gain spiritual refreshment from the foundation of our faith, from the most precious Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

How is Jesus able to walk on? How is he able to bear his way of the Cross? Answer: he walks on in trust in his heavenly Father. He knows that his path is not misguided and his life is not being wasted, for he has been *sent* to his mission, to him has a sacred ministry been given:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he *gave* his only begotten Son...

So that is *how* Jesus is able to walk his way of the Cross. He does it in trust in his heavenly Father. He seeks above all that the will of his Father should be accomplished, for he knows, better than anyone else can know, that the will of his heavenly Father is good and saving.

And *why* does Jesus walk on? What is his objective? What is he determined to accomplish? Answer, Jesus seeks us! He seeks our salvation. He would not be without us. He has not come to condemn us, but to save us:

¹⁷For God sent *not* his Son into the world *to condemn* the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:17, KJV)

Jesus would not be without others. He would not be without Raymond Schulze. I think that is why the people in the line looked upon Raymond so tenderly and with joy at his victory -- a victory gained not through his own merits, but through the merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus.

If any condemnation remains in this world, it is not from Jesus. That is not his ministry. It is not to condemn, but to save. No, if any condemnation remains for us, it is what we choose for ourselves. In Christ is *life*, even abundance of life. If we then forsake portions of our threescore and ten years to turn away from him, we thereby condemn ourselves to a pretty shallow life -- a life that could well cause misery both for ourselves and for others.

Jesus walks on toward the Cross. He has a ministry, and oh how constrained he is until he accomplishes it. He means to walk on teaching and practicing love for others, even love for sinners, even love for his enemies. And as he walks, he bids us to up and follow him. It is a high calling. Let us yield to it and follow him who loves us, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.