In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel Lesson for today is from John Chapter 3, beginning with verse 14. But I want to begin a bit earlier in this great chapter. My opening text, then, begins with verse 1 in John Chapter 3. It is about Nicodemus. It is in the course of conversation with that man that Jesus speaks his golden words about God so loving the world that he gave his only begotten son. Nicodemus is the occasion for this sublime saying. We first read of him in Verse 1 of Chapter 3:

1Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2This man came to Jesus by night ... (John 3:1-2, RSV)

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “Our Friend Nicodemus.” The man bears responsibility, akin, I suppose, to being a Supreme Court Justice in our land, or a U.S. Senator. He is a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee, which means that he is a devout and learned man. He feels both political and spiritual responsibility for his people. I want to deal gently with him, for I admire him. He grows in courage in relationship to Jesus. Let it be so with us too, that we grow in our public commitment to Jesus.

Mention of Nicodemus occurs three times in the Gospel of St. John — here, early in the story, in the middle, and at the end. I mean to look at all three occasions, but I want to save this beginning, mighty conversation in Chapter Three to the last. In Chapter Three, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. It appears that is reluctant to be openly seen conversing with Jesus. By the end of the story, Nicodemus lets the whole world see that he cares for Jesus. My sermon sequence then will be to consider Nicodemus in the middle of the story, then at the end, and finally I want to return to the beginning — to this nighttime conversation when Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again and gives his golden testimony about the love of God for our whole world.

To the middle of the story, then. In John Chapter 7, we find Nicodemus speaking up for Jesus before the chief priests and the Pharisees. There is a division of opinion concerning Jesus. The people seem to think that he is the Christ. The people believe in Jesus, but the Pharisees do not. And so we read of the people:
... many of the people believed in him; they said, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?” (John 7:31, RSV)

Well, this just annoys the Pharisees. They are troubled and alarmed and so they send to take Jesus.

But the officers return empty-handed. The Pharisees are furious about this. They demand an explanation, which gives the officers a chance to give a great testimony about Jesus. And so we read this:

45 Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? 46 The officers answered, Never man spake like this man. (John 7:45-46, KJV)

And that is the truth! There have been many great preachers in this world, and many great prophets, but “Never man spake like this man,” like Jesus!

So the officers do not arrest Jesus. This makes the Pharisees mad and they accuse the officers and the crowd of being deceived and ignorant of God’s law. Then Nicodemus, this morning’s hero, speaks up in defense of Jesus. He goes against the drift of his fellow Pharisees, which can be a hard thing to do. Nicodemus defends Jesus by speaking of fairness. The passage goes this way:

50 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (John 7:50-51, RSV)

This rather breaks the spell of threat against Jesus. The Pharisees rebuke Nicodemus:

They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee.” (John 7:52, RSV)

But the scene comes to an end, and “And every man went unto his own house.” (John 7:53, KJV) Thus Nicodemus saves the situation from getting worse.

So, that is Nicodemus in the middle of the story. Let’s move to the man at the end of the story. Jesus has died. He has breathed his last, there on the cross, and commended himself into the hands of his heavenly Father. Now something must be done with the body of our Lord. If the disciples of Jesus
had taken the body of Jesus away, that would have been normal and right. But St. Matthew reports that the disciples had forsaken Jesus and fled (Matthew 26:56). It is not the disciples who claim the body. Instead it is two heretofore secret disciples of Jesus who claim the body — Joseph of Arimathaea and our man Nicodemus (John 19:38-39). But to claim the body, they cannot quietly take Jesus down from the cross and bury him. Instead, they must seek permission from Pilate, the Roman Governor. This they do, and in doing it, they become public. They seek an executive decision. It is probably recorded in the minutes. They most go to the powerful man who had authorized the crucifixion of Jesus, stand before him, and request the body—as if this is a body worth treating with respect. It is a step not likely to win the favor of Pilate nor of the fellow Pharisees of Nicodemus. But by this point, it is as if Nicodemus does not care much about the opinion of others. He, for one, is not ashamed of Jesus. He has grown, in my opinion. He now seems publicly willing to be known as someone cares very much about Jesus.

Now, let’s return to that great John Chapter Three, with its golden saying, John 3:16-17. I have used the King James Version in this morning’s reading, the words are so well-known and so beautiful:

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.

No wonder Nicodemus ends up a public follower of Jesus! These great words are a kind of summit of the nighttime conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. If Nicodemus could not thoroughly understand them at the time, still we can believe that these words found their way into his heart and progressively changed him, so that he gave his heart to Jesus. May these words do the same for us. May they increase our loyalty to Jesus.

To admire this golden verse, John 3:16, let us begin by noticing what it is that God loves. He loves something big, grand, unworthy, but there it is. Our verse does not say that God so loved “the church,” but rather “the world.” Listen again:

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

I am happy for this, and I bet you are too, for we love this world! It is big, it is frustrating, it is unjust, it is beautiful, it is the place where Jesus was born. It is the place judged worthy by God for Jesus to live and love, to teach and to die.
There is not a soul on this planet that God does not love — never has been such a neglected soul, never will be! The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cares about you and your family, you and your friends, you and your enemies, about the multitudes of people on this earth we do not even know. Our God loves them all, along with the cats and dogs, trees and rivers. Our God loves every person on this earth and wants them to come to Jesus, walk with him, and have everlasting life. This is the basis of our work here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. We want this whole wide world to come to Jesus. Our Lord once asked the question,

...when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?
(Luke 18:8, RSV)

Will he find faith on earth? It is the question that grounds our whole work of evangelism. It is the question that makes sense of my ministry and my career. It is the question behind the Pastor’s Booth. I believe that we should so work for Jesus that as far as lies possible with us, we will answer, “Yes! Praise God. There shall be faith on earth, for we are working at it!” There is much good that needs to be done in this world — much good that our God wants to be done and wants Christians to do. But this work — faith on earth — this work is the church’s work, it is our congregation’s work. And if we do not do it, the world is not going to do it for us. God so loves the world that we had best do what we can to bring the whole world to Jesus!

Let me continue to praise John 3:16 by reading a passage from St. John Chrysostom’s homily on this verse. The golden-tongued preacher said this:

...by the expression, “so loved,” and that other, “…the world,” He shows the great strength of His love. Large and infinite was the interval between the two. He, the immortal, who is without beginning, the Infinite Majesty, they but dust and ashes, full of ten thousand sins, who, ungrateful, have at all times offended Him; and these He “loved.” Again, the words which He added after these are alike significant, when He saith, that “He gave His Only-begotten Son,” not a servant, not an Angel, not an Archangel. And yet no one would show such anxiety for his own child, as God did for His ungrateful servants.

Well, one of the people of this world that God so loved was our man Nicodemus. Jesus does not condemn him. Indeed, Jesus condemns no one, as we read in that magnificent next verse, John 3:17:
For 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)

Nicodemus comes under the shadow of night, he comes in fear, but he comes to the right man. And in coming to Jesus, Nicodemus started a path that led to his standing up for Jesus before his fellow Pharisees and his eventual public claiming of Jesus at the cross.

Nicodemus claimed the dead body of Jesus. It was all he could do at that point. It was the best he could do. But in claiming the body of Jesus, Nicodemus threw in his lot with the Man who would not remain dead. He threw in his lot with Jesus, who is resurrected from the dead, who is able to go on loving Nicodemus from that first Easter morning through all eternity. It is this same Jesus Christ who also loves you and me and our neighbors and wants us all to come to him, where we will find rest for our souls and life everlasting, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.