

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.

Today's Holy Cross liturgy celebrates a piece of wood — rugged wood, it was, fashioned into a shape that was bound to break the heart of the condemned criminal as he approached it. There was room for his body to hang on that wood, room for his arms to be flung outwards and pounded with spikes into that wood. We are speaking of the cross, and by way of a sacred contrary, we celebrate the very instrument of torture by which our Saviour died.

If you were to go out into the rear hallway of this undercroft and were to shove aside the sofa sitting there near the water fountain, you would find a trap door in the floor. Opening that door and shining down a flashlight, you would be able to see a marvelous structural element of our church: a massive, old wooden beam stretching the width of our church. All the weight in our church's façade — all that brick and stone and stained glass — rests on that beam of wood, as it has rested securely for more than a century now. I cannot imagine where they would find such wooden beams these days. What is it? Hickory? Oak? It is hardwood and strong. If I were to lie on it, stretch myself out, and try to wrap my arms around that beam, I'm not sure I could do it, it is so thick. I'm not sure my fingers would meet. Some churches rest on steel. Our church rests on wood.

My! How wood blesses us here at Immanuel! We have strong and gracefully fashioned wood in David Ralph's piano there — our old Bösendorfer. We have delicate and beautiful wood in Zoe Hassman's cello. Upstairs, in our church nave, we have all that dark old wood in our balconies. The craftsmen back then who built our church lavished themselves on the wood. When you see our new Gothic-style light fixtures hanging from our balconies, you will see

that Russell Collins has incorporated into the design of the light fixtures a cross — an architectural element carved by those old craftsmen into the facing of our balconies. And, then, we have our masterpiece: the reredos, with its wood carvings of Moses, Jesus, and St. John the Evangelist. Some churches rest on steel. Our church rests on wood.

Indeed, not only our church, but in the end, the whole world rests on wood: for our world owes its hope and its very life to that cruel work of wood two thousand years ago — the old, rugged cross.

Notice that I speak of “the world.” The whole world rests on the holy Cross.

This morning's Bible reading includes one of the most famous and most beautiful passages in the Bible: John 3:16. Since 1993, the Dean of King's College, London, England is a New Testament scholar named The Revd. Dr. Richard A. Burridge. In his lectionary notes on this morning's sublime passage, Dr. Burridge says this:

“... for God so loved the world” tells us that it is the *world*, for all its sin and shortcomings, which is the object of God's love. Sometimes Christians, in their neglect of the world, act as if John 3:16 read[s] “For God so loved the *church* that he gave...” Yet this Gospel makes it abundantly clear that God cares for the whole world in sending his “only Son.”¹

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts — The Third Readings* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), page 500.

I bet you join me in rejoicing about this — that the love of God revealed in our Saviour Jesus Christ is so deep and so broad that it takes in the whole world, along with every soul on our planet.

Certainly, let us have no doubts about God's love for the *church*. As St. Paul says, "...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."(Ephesians 5:25). Again, Christ "nourishes and cherishes" the church.(Ephesians 5:29) By baptism you are part of the church and so have no fear our doubt about God's love for you. God loves the church and therefore loves you.

But is it not wonderful to think too that God loves *the world*. For are you not part of the world? Reach out and touch your arms, your shoulders, your knees. There you are! You are part of this world. You can doubt many things, but you cannot doubt this: you are part of the world, and therefore you are beloved of God, for God so loved the *world*.

Yesterday, I took the Blessed Sacrament to one of our nursing home members. It has been so long since Dorothy has been in church, I doubt that there any many of you left who know her. All these years I have visited Dorothy, but I never found her in bed. She was always up, trying to rehab at first, trying to walk, and then in recent years, sitting in her wheelchair out there with the nurses and the other residents. But yesterday I found her in bed. And she is so weak and filled with pain, that it was hard for her to concentrate and to follow the Bible reading and the words of the liturgy. But one thing she could understand is that she is still part of this world, and therefore, beloved of the God who loves the world. Let all else be uncertain — that is not uncertain: she, you, and I are beloved of the God who gave his only begotten Son to die for the world, and the Son gladly went and bore the suffering involved that the whole world might have hope.

This past week was a melancholy week for our city and for our land because we remembered the horrors of September 11 six years ago. Bin Laden is still free and still seems to hate us. You have heard his call for a "caravan of martyrs." The version I read in the *Washington Post* goes like this:

"I tell every young man among the youth of Islam: It is your duty to join the caravan [of martyrs] until the sufficiency is complete and the march to aid the High and Omnipotent continues," bin Laden says, according to a transcript provided by IntelCenter.²

But we believe that God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is not like this. He loves the whole world, including Bin Laden and those poor people Bin Laden sends off to be martyrs.

Recently I watched again the Disney version of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and Wardrobe*. I never grow weary of Lewis's story. How could I? It is a charming and moving version of the story of Christ.

To review the story a bit, owing to love of a candy – Turkish Delight – the third of the Pevensie children – Edmund – is captured by the White Witch of Narnia and betrays his brother, Peter, and his sisters, Susan and Lucy. Eventually Edmund is rescued, but it is no good, because the White Witch lays claim to Edmund, according to an ancient law giving her possession of all traitors.

What the White Witch does not know is that there is an even more ancient wisdom according to which the life of a traitor can be redeemed by the substitutionary death of an innocent one. She agrees to exchange Edmund for Aslan himself, and then slays Aslan — that good and mighty lion, the very image of Christ.

The sacrifice scene is heartbreaking. Aslan is bound and stretched out on a stone table. He is beaten and mocked. His flowing mane is cut off. And finally, he is stabbed to death.

Now, Aslan comes back to life, which is crucial, else Edmund and his siblings would have been killed any way by the White Witch, along with all the other good creatures of Aslan.

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/11/AR2007091102465.html?wpisrc=newsletter>

But what I want to lift up now is that though Aslan died for a single child, Edmund, the real Christ died for the *world*. And the world is made up of an awful lot of sinners! Many of them are absolutely despicable. Yet, for some mysterious reason, Jesus died for them too. His love sees beyond what they are, or what they have done, to what they could be, to what they *will be* if only they will come to him.

So, that is Christ. He did not come to condemn, but to save. It is as John 3:17 says:

¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

The heart and the character of Jesus are well established and revealed. But what of us? And what of the world?

In this morning's Gospel — the Gospel according to St. John — people sometimes drift between the darkness and the light. So it is with Nicodemus, for example. The man comes to Jesus in the night-time, when it is dark and private, but soon his commitment to Jesus becomes public and known in broad daylight. First, Nicodemus intercedes for Jesus with his fellow Pharisees. He does this good deed in spite of the indignation of the Pharisees:

⁴⁵Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? ⁴⁶The officers answered, Never man spake like this man. ⁴⁷Then answered them the Pharisees, Are ye also deceived? ⁴⁸Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? ⁴⁹But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. ⁵⁰Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) ⁵¹Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? ⁵²They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.(John 7:49-52, KJV)

And then, finally, at the death of Jesus on the Cross, Nicodemus again steps forward in an act of compassion:

³⁸And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. ³⁹And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. ⁴⁰Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. ⁴¹Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. ⁴²There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.(John 19:38-42)

Nicodemus, then, starts off in the darkness, but emerges into the light as he walks with Jesus.

But, alas, Judas does the reverse. He walks with Jesus in broad daylight, but is bound for the darkness when he goes out to betray Jesus:

³⁰So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.(John 13:30, NRS)

Does not this seem inevitable, this movement between darkness and light depending on our relationship to Jesus? After all, we human beings flourish under the warmth of love, and Jesus loves us deeply. There is no advantage for us, nor for the world, in walking away from Jesus. We can only render ourselves lonelier and frozen — as if property of the White Witch — by walking away from this One who loves us and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.