



A Message of Love for a Church in Mission

Sunday Bible Study Outline-Synodical Convention
Dr. William Diekelman

“One Message -- CHRIST -- His Love Is Here For You”

PRAYER Before the study of God's Word

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, without Your help our labor is useless, and without Your light our search is in vain. Invigorate our study of Your holy word that, by due diligence and right discernment, we may establish ourselves and others in Your holy faith; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Lutheran Service Book*, 312)

The focus of this convention is *One Message-Christ*. During these next few days we will make plans for the next few years and beyond. Those plans will center on making known Christ's love by word and deed within our churches, communities, and the world.

How do we do that? How do we make known the love of Christ? How do we nurture those who regularly sit in the pews of our LCMS parishes as we bring the Kingdom of God to bear on their lives? How do we reach out to those we meet, for example, at the Little League game, the person who works next to us, and the neighbor who has no Christian church home? In the few moments we have together this morning we are going to look to the Gospel of John for guidance as to how we can actually bring Christ's love to bear on the lives of the people we know and meet.

In chapter 3 of John's Gospel we read the story of Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who sought out Jesus under the cover of night. Verse 2 tells us that he probably came that night out of curiosity about who Jesus was. But as was usually the case—and we can reference here Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4—Jesus drew people into the conversation and then led them to discover His identity and the gifts He offers. Immediately following the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, the inspired Apostle records the one Bible passage that is probably known by more people than any other in the Scriptures—and I dare say by everyone in this room.

You may remember the guy who, a few years ago, was a fixture at almost every televised golf tournament, major league baseball game, and other televised sporting events. He was usually dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, had multi-colored frizzy hair, and positioned himself so that the TV camera was on him just when the golfer would hit the ball or the pitcher was about to throw his fast ball. His last name was Rollen and his nickname was Rockin', Rockin' Rollen. And, every time the TV camera was on him, he held up a sign on which was printed: John 3:16. Now I don't know how many people actually knew that this was a Bible reference and reached for their Bibles to read these words: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” But for a few moments he had the attention of the world!

I memorized the words of John 3:16, as I'm sure many of you did, too, when I was a small child. They were probably the very first words of Scripture that I memorized, and I have carried them with me my whole life. Today as we reflect on these words I invite you to focus with me on one little word—often unnoticed—of enormous significance in this verse: the word “so.”

In the Greek text this is the first word in the sentence. It is pronounced “*houtōs*.” Actually, depending on the context, it can have a variety of meanings. In English, too, we use the word “so” in various ways. Consider, for example, the word “so” meaning “very” as in “this is so important” Or, sometimes it means “therefore” as in “so when he returns...” Or, it can even mean something like “to the degree or extent that,” as in “so long as I have breath...” Or, “having a purpose” as in “so gathered here to study.” But here in John 3:16 the Greek word actually means “In this manner; in this way.” With this meaning, the word is often used in discourse or narrative material to point directly to what follows. Take for example John 21:1: “After this Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed him in this way (*houtōs*) [ESV]. Then follows the account of the post-Easter morning breakfast appearance of Jesus to His disciples.

Houtōs. What a gem this little word is! A tiny word of enormous significance: “In this manner.” This is *how* God did it, how He accomplished your salvation. In a sense, you could say that the whole story of our salvation is packed into this simple word. It points to God’s plan to redeem the world.

On March 17, 2006, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* ran a fascinating article on how some scientists think the world began. They think that the world expanded to astounding proportions in the trillionth of a second as the result of an explosion from matter about the size of a marble. We can think of John 3:16 something like this, and in particular John’s little word “*houtōs*,” “SO.” In this high-density “marble-sized” word is packed the whole matter of the world’s salvation. “God SO loved that world THAT....” Coupled with the word “THAT” we see the result God intended. God’s love for the world was unique and unparalleled, and He would stop at nothing to have His world with Him eternally.

The story of HOW God loved the world begins with creation. God called everything into being by His word: the sun, moon and stars; the fish of the sea, birds of the air; beasts of the field and every living creature, including us. And, when creation was complete God pronounced “it is *very good*” (Gen. 1”31). God loved the world He created. Even when God made known His will to Adam and Eve—His boundary in the garden—it surely was not because He wanted to make life difficult for them. Rather, it was because He loved them. God’s love has many dimensions. But as we have learned from Luther’s Small Catechism, God’s Law is summarized in a single word: LOVE. God loved His creatures and wanted them to live in harmony with Him, expressing in return their love for Him.

Tragically, however, mankind sinned and fell under God’s condemnation. Now God’s Law exposes sin for what it really is. It reveals how rebellious human beings turn in on themselves and make an agony out of a life that God intended in the beginning should be a blessing. In case there was any doubt about God’s real intent, Jesus sharpened what God meant. Jesus taught:

- “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matt. 5:21,22).
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27,28).
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5: 43-45).

Jesus makes it all the more clear how impossible it is for us sinful people to keep perfectly God’s righteous demands. Any infraction means that the creature that God loved so dearly must die eternally. But it is not God’s intent to leave the situation like this!

SO—in this way—God demonstrated His great love for the world He created: He sent His Son Jesus to buy back the world from sin and death and the power of the devil. Do you remember how Martin Luther described this: “not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death?” So, in this manner, Jesus went to the cross to pay, with His own body and blood, the exacting price God demanded in order to deliver each person on earth from the penalty they deserved, eternal death. That’s the price Jesus paid. Think of it! We deserved eternal condemnation. But, out of His love for us God refused to condemn the world. As John puts it, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:17).

God therefore wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth that in Jesus He was reconciling the world to Himself, making friends again (2 Cor. 5:19). This is where we come in, those of us who regularly sit in the pews of our LCMS parishes. We have thousands of professional church workers, many in this room right now, who are equipping millions of us to vigorously make known the love of Christ in our churches, communities, and the world. Every single soul is valuable to God. Not one person is more or less important to Him. In Luke 15 we read that “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

We are the link between the Word of God, His love for the world and His desire that all people should be saved. Some people in our communities may not know that Jesus Christ died to forgive their sins. We are the church and we have been instructed by Jesus to go, tell, teach, and baptize. The words of the hymn “Hark, the Voice of Jesus Crying” say it well

Hark, the voice of Jesus crying, “Who will go and work today?
Fields are white and harvests waiting—Who will bear the sheaves away?”
Loud and long the Master calleth; Rich reward He offers thee.
Who will answer, gladly saying, “Here am I, send me, send me”?

If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul,
 You can tell the love of Jesus, You can say He died for all.
 If you cannot be a watchman...Pointing out the path to heaven,
 You can be like faithful Aaron, holding up the prophet's hands.

And, finally, these words...

Let none hear you idly saying, "There is nothing I can do."
 While the multitudes are dying And the Master calls for you.
 Take the task He gives you gladly, Let His work your pleasure be;
 Answer quickly when He calleth, "Here am I, send me, send me!"

So, God's "SO" becomes our "SO"!

Here is what we are going to do: when I tell you, please get into groups of four or less, no more than four, so each of you will have an opportunity to speak. Please take about ten minutes to discuss these questions:

1. What opportunities have you had recently to speak to someone that you know does not attend a Christian church, about the hope that is in you for your eternal salvation? To invite someone to attend your church with you? Can you identify by name one person right now that you know doesn't attend a Christian church?
2. What is your congregation doing intentionally and vigorously to make known the love of Christ, by word and deed in your congregation, your community and the world?

God acted to save us while we were dead in our trespasses and sins. He set us apart to declare His praises to those inside and outside the church. Not everybody has discovered a comfortable way to talk about their own faith to others. But you can encourage someone in their quest to do this. You can teach them to say what you say. You can take someone with you to demonstrate how you share the Good News about how Jesus Christ came to give eternal life to all who believe in Him.

President Kieschnick told us in his inaugural speech on September 8, 2001 that "We must begin to honestly view as simply unacceptable the fact that we are surrounded by people who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior from sin. It must be of utmost concern to our Synod and to each one of us that such individuals are on their way to eternal condemnation. We must, in winsome fashion, share the Good News of what God has done through Christ in order that those who accept by faith His undeserved love will spend eternity with Him, in heaven, forever."

I pray that in our days together we will celebrate our past efforts of Gospel proclamation and empower the people of our LCMS congregations to make known boldly the love of Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Proclaiming this is our mission, our ONE mission: Christ. God bless our convention and the work each of us does every day to that end.

PRAYER For the mission of the Church

Almighty God, You have called Your Church to witness that in Christ You have reconciled us to Yourself. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may proclaim the good news of Your salvation so that all who hear it may receive the gift of salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Lutheran Service Book*, 305)