

OK, here are 3 for St. Patrick's Day. Paddy tells of the first time he took his son out for a pint. "I got him a Guinness. He didn't like it, so I drank it. Then I got him a Kilkenny's, he didn't like that either, so I drank it. Finally, I thought he might like a Harp's Lager. Didn't like that either. So I drank it. I thought maybe he'd like whisky better than beer so we tried a Jameson's; nope! In desperation, I had him try that rare Redbreast, Ireland's finest whisky. He wouldn't even smell it. What could I do but drink it? By the time I realized he just didn't like to drink, I was so drunk I could hardly push his stroller back home!

Murphy told Quinn that his wife was driving him to drink. Quinn thinks that's very lucky because his own wife makes him walk.

Mick goes to the vet with his goldfish. "I think it's got epilepsy," he tells the vet. The Vet takes a look and says, "It seems calm enough to me." Mick says "I haven't taken it out of the bowl yet!"

OK, down to business. First, a little background on the gospel. We encounter a prominent Pharisee, a 'Jewish leader,' Nicodemus, who comes to visit the 'teacher of Israel.' That such a prominent, knowledgeable person is in the posture of a student, an inquirer, is interesting. Throughout John's Gospel, many will be befuddled by Jesus, wondering, 'Who is this?' It's no accident that John's Gospel is called the mystical gospel. In this passage we move from mysterious and wonderful *signs* – that's what John alone calls all of Jesus' miracles – from signs to definite words spoken by Jesus. And yet the meaning of the words will not be self-evident, and understandable. Nicodemus will be confused by much that Jesus has to say to him.

There is some strange talk about the snake lifted up in the wilderness, referring to Numbers 21, the story of the people who were healed by looking at a snake mounted on a pole after being bitten by the fiery serpents, which is a prefiguring of Jesus lifted up on the cross to heal the world. But then the talk continues to be strange as Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of 'eternal life' and the 'world.' The world in John's Gospel is a place of darkness into which the light shines, the realm of rejection where 'His own people didn't welcome Him' (1:11). In His Last Supper discourses later in John, Jesus will repeatedly refer to 'the world' in quite a negative sense.

And yet here Jesus says to Nicodemus that "God so LOVED the world." The world, for all of its rejection of Jesus, is not rejected by God-in-Christ. The world is not just the realm of darkness and trouble. The world is a place God considered worthy of His dying to save it. Our Catholic biblical faith says the world is of enormous importance because God created it. He made it, He sustains it, He speaks in it, He moves in it. He sent the Christ into it, who walked on it, who ate on it, who preached on it, who loved on it, who died on it. It is of tremendous importance. (adapted from Frederick Buechner, *THE REMARKABLE ORDINARY*, p. 33-34)

We are told that God SENT His son into this world. That God the Father 'sends' the Son is a statement that occurs more than 50 times in John's Gospel. In our consideration of this text today, we need to make sure that we do not miss this sending motif. *MISSIO* is the Latin word, from which we get the word missionary. God sent the Son into the world not to condemn it, which the confused world which rejects Him certainly deserves, but rather to 'save' the world.

True, some are judged. Yet judgment is not so much by the action of Jesus as by their own rejection of Jesus. And we need to remember that judgment always belongs to God alone. (adapted from Willimon, *PULPIT RESOURCE*, Jan-Mar 2018, p. 30)

OK, so what? Second point. Almost everyone of us in this church is baptized, right? And with baptism came a mission. We too are sent. And the test of whether or not this parish has 'good liturgy,' the John 3:16 test, how WE love the world-that-God-loves -- is how we perform out there. We cannot worship a homeless person here on Sundays and then ignore one on Mondays. And the salvation of the WORLD depends on how we act out there. Because we are SENT to continue Christ's work. And I'm afraid how much we know or what words we use are not going to be the answer to saving the world. It will be our DEEDS. Mega-Church Pastor Rick Warren says in his book THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE, "I'm looking for a second reformation. The first reformation of the church 500 years ago was about beliefs, words. This one is going to be about deeds. It is not going to be about what the church believes, but about what the Church is DOING." (Yancey, VANISHING GRACE p. 125) And Dr. Warren is simply repeating the insight that Francis of Assisi taught 700 years ago when he told his friars: "Preach the Gospel, brothers. Use words if you must."

Writing to fellow pastors, the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer advised that in response to those who stand against the church, "the quiet service of love is the best spiritual care."

What does love look like in the face of hostility? A gentle answer turns away wrath, the writer of Proverbs tells us. Are we kind to those who are unkind to us, or do we match their criticism and name-calling with more of the same? If so, we are not going to be very effective missionaries! And we will not be loving the world as God loves it.

We all know that the quiet service of love can disarm situations. There is the compelling example of Dr. Francis Collins. Collins has impeccable credentials as a scientist: he holds both a PHD and an MD degree and directed the Human Genome Project toward its triumphant goal of mapping all three billion letters of the human genetic code. Collins also identifies himself as a committed Christian and has engaged in cordial public debates with atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

Due to his Christian faith, Collins' nomination to head the National Institutes of Health, the nation's largest scientific organization, attracted strident criticism. One scientist accused Collins of suffering from dementia, and another complained, "I don't want American science to be represented by a clown." Skeptics scoffed at his respect for the Bible: When TV host Bill Maher told Richard Dawkins falsely that Collins believes in a talking snake, Dawkins replied, "He's not a bright guy."

In time, though, Collins won over most of his critics. On periodic visits to Oxford he has tea with Richard Dawkins. Similarly, he met often with the militant atheist Christopher Hitchens, author of GOD IS NOT GREAT. And when Collins learned that Hitchens had esophageal cancer, he called to offer help: "As NIH director I approve many government-funded research grants, and I know about some rather cutting-edge approaches based on cancer genomics." Over the next few months he spent hours with the Hitchens family going over options for treatment.

Christopher Hitchens lived with his cancer for a year and a half, an ordeal that he chronicled in regular columns for VANITY FAIR magazine. He told of receiving hateful messages from Christians, including one who, believing mistakenly that Hitchens had throat cancer, rejoiced that "he got cancer in the one part of his body he used for blasphemy....THEN comes the real fun, when he's sent to HELLFIRE forever to be tortured and set afire." How can we do such things to one another? In the name of Christ?! Yet one of Hitchens' last columns paid tribute to Francis Collins, whom he described as "one of the greatest living Americans" and "our most selfless Christian physician." Apparently Christopher Hitchens had no deathbed conversion and passed from this life as a convinced atheist. But from one friend, at least, he received spiritual care, "the quiet service of love." Francis Collins fulfilled the command in Hebrews: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God...."

The rest is in God's hands. And he loved the WORLD as God did. (adapted from Philip Yancey, VANISHING GRACE, p. 41-42)

Third, a children's book, OLD TURTLE AND THE BROKEN TRUTH tells the story of how the world God created came to be so fragmented even though it is meant to be whole -- and how we might put it back together again. One night, in a far-away land that 'is somehow not so far away,' a truth falls from the stars. As it falls, it breaks into two pieces; one piece blazes off through the sky and the other falls straight to the ground. One day, a man stumbles upon the gravity-drawn truth and finds carved on it the words, 'You are loved.' It makes him feel good, so he keeps it and shares it with the people in his tribe. The thing sparkles and makes the people who have it feel warm and happy. It becomes their most prized possession, and they call it 'The Truth.' Those who have the truth grow afraid of those who don't have it, who are different or see things differently or believe differently. And those who don't have it covet it. Soon people are fighting wars over the truth, trying to capture it for themselves.

A little girl who is troubled by the growing violence, greed, and destruction in her once-peaceful world goes on a journey – through the Mountains of Imagining, the River of Wondering Why, and the Forest of Finding Out – to speak with Old Turtle, the wise counselor. Old Turtle tells her that the Truth is broken and missing a piece, a piece that shot off in the night sky so long ago. Together they search for it and, when they find it, the little girl puts the jagged piece in her pocket and returns to her people. She tries to explain, but no one will listen or understand. Finally, a raven flies the broken truth to the top of a tower, where the other piece has been ensconced for safety, and the rejoined pieces shine their full message: "you are loved/ and so are they." And the people begin to comprehend. And the earth begins to heal. (taken from Richard Rohr, daily posting of 12/17/2016) THAT'S how we will accomplish our mission to love the world as GOD loves the world. Let the church say Amen.