

Sermon for Sunday, September 8, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE CRAZY THING GOD DID"
St. John 3:14-21

Text: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." St. John 3:16

As I think back into my early Sunday School days, it seems to me that the first verse I ever learned was our text for today. I suspect the same is true for most of you. Yet, there is a subtle danger in such intimate familiarity with something. I am reminded of the story of the man who lived next door to the boiler factory. Now, I don't know if you know much about boiler factories, but there is an awful lot of noise in making boilers. One day a friend visited the man and the noise from next door was getting on his nerves. Finally in some exasperation he exclaimed, "How in the world can you stand all of that hammering, banging noise?" With some puzzlement the man replied, "What noise?" He had lived so long with it that it no longer registered on his conscious mind. Well, a familiar passage like John 3:16 is sometimes like that. We are so familiar with it--so accustomed to it--that what it has to say to us no longer registers on us. For that reason, I would like for us to examine together this morning this passage. Perhaps in the process we can recapture some of the excitement that would come to a man who read it for the first time.

Emile Caillet was a distinguished French scholar who by 1932 was already a National Fellow of the French Academy of Science. But Dr. Caillet was not a Christian for although a grown and married man, he had never seen a Bible. One day his wife brought one home and showed it to him. In the story of his spiritual autobiography he writes, "I literally grabbed the book and rushed to my study with it...I read and read, and read--now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within...I could not find words to express my awe and wonder....I continued to read deeply into the night, mostly from the Gospels. And lo and behold, as I looked through them, the One of whom they spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them, became alive to me." This morning I covet such a thrill for us--the awe and wonder of a fresh new insight into this verse of scripture which is the whole Bible in one sentence, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The first thing in this passage I would call to your attention is the actor--the one who acts. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world..." You know, I have people tell me that they have problems with some of the miracles in the Bible. They say that they can't believe in the Virgin Birth, or that Jesus walked on the water, or that a blind person was healed. None of those questions bother me. No, the thing I have trouble with in the Bible is to believe that God--God the Creator of the Universe; God the maker of heaven and earth; God the beginning and the end of all things--that this God is interested in me or cares about me. Now that just staggers my mind. And if I can believe that what is the significance of a little thing like a miracle?

I suppose every person here this morning has someone who loves him--a wife, mother, a child, a friend. Yet, as I live out my own life and as I share in the lives of so many of you, I have discovered that the love of others simply is not enough to sustain us. You see, some disaster strikes, a death comes, some tragedy overwhelms us, some disappointment consumes us. And when that happens life threatens to turn

to ashes in our hands. The love of others is important, but it is not enough. At a time like that we need a love that is divine.

George Matheson was one of the greatest preachers that Scotland ever produced. Yet, by the time he was 18, his eyesight which had been fading was gone and he was totally blind. His fiance rejected him and in his world of darkness he knew utter despair. Human love had failed him. Yet, in spite of that personal tragedy, George Matheson rose to fame. Perhaps the secret of his success lay in the words of a hymn he wrote and which we sang a moment ago. You see, in the despair of his blindness he found that God loved him and it made all the difference in the world. Some of the words that grew out of that experience go like this: "O love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee: I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow, may richer, fuller be." And that is what it means for God to love you--a love that will not let you go.

Notice in the second place not only the Actor, but the action, the crazy thing God did. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." The action is a love that gives. Picture a stable in a small, dusty, insignificant town and a little baby being born--that's how much God loves you. Picture a tired and weary man, walking along the dusty Galilean roads, healing the sick, speaking a word of comfort and hope, having compassion on the poor, the hurt, the broken-hearted--that's how much God loves you. Picture a man bound in chains, his clothes in tatters, his back a mass of cruel cuts and bleeding wounds from the awful bite of a whip--spat upon, beaten, despised, humiliated--that's how much God loves you. Picture the agony of a figure upon a cross, his hands and feet nailed to the wood, his side an open wound, the heat of the day burning upon him, his lips tormented and parched--that's the crazy thing God did, that's how much God loves you.

Are any of us worthy of such love? Do any of us deserve that kind of sacrifice? Well, you know we do not. We are hearing a lot today about so-called "no fault" insurance. In the past, the blame for an accident was fixed on someone and a great deal of time, energy, and money was spent in trying to decide who was at fault and who should pay. No fault insurance bypasses that. It doesn't try to fix blame or guilt, but gets on with the business of repairing the damage. In one sense of the word, that is what God's action in Jesus does for us. God isn't interested in sorting out who is guilty of this and who to blame for that because we are all guilty and all to blame. Instead he goes about the business of repairing the damage. You see, you cannot unsay what you have said; you can't undo what you have done; you can't change what others have said and done. No, the past cannot be changed. But the point is this: the results can be changed. God's action on the cross is God making our guilt his guilt, our failure his failure. He takes the consequence of our sin and guilt and goes about the business of repairing the damage, of healing the hurt, of removing guilt.

After the death of Abraham Lincoln, there began the long, sad funeral journey back to Illinois. When the body passed through Cleveland, the procession stopped momentarily while the body lay in state. An elderly black lady stood patiently in the long line for hours, holding a little child in her arms. At last their turn came to pass before the casket. For a long time she stood gazing into the face of the man responsible for freeing her people from slavery, and then she held the little child up and whispered to her, "Take a long, long look, honey; that man died for you." My friends, take a long, long look at Calvary this morning--that man died for you. Yes, the crazy thing God did, a love that gives that does something about our sin.

In the year 79 A.D., Mt. Vesuvius erupted and the hot volcanic lava covered the great and prosperous city of Pompeii beneath its destructive flow. You can imagine the terror and fright and despair that must have swept over the hearts of those people that day as death and destruction poured down upon them. Today excavations have been made of Pompeii and many pathetic and pitiful things have been found. One of the things discovered was the petrified remains of a woman clinging to her crippled child. It is a sort of silent sermon on mother love that stops at no sacrifice for her child. Perhaps by herself this mother might have escaped, but she would not leave behind her crippled child to die alone even though it cost her own life. In a far, far deeper way God would not leave behind his children, crippled and twisted and wounded by sin and guilt to die alone--would not leave them even though it cost him, "For God so loved the world that he gave..." Yes, that's the crazy thing God did, that's how God loves you.

We have seen in this passage of Scripture the Actor, and the action. I don't know if there is any such word, but notice in the third place the "actee"; that is, the one for whom the actor takes the action. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes..." In that context, can there be any word more thrilling in the whole world than that little word, "whosoever"? "Whosoever" includes kings and princes, rulers and potentates. But "whosoever" includes ordinary people like you and like me. "Whosoever" is inclusive. Nobody is excluded. I don't care who you are this morning--rich or poor, young or old, male or female, black or white, good or bad--that "whosoever" includes you. I don't care what you may have done, what sin you have committed, what evil you have done, what guilt you bear, that "whosoever" includes you. Yes, that's the crazy thing God did. He bore the guilt, he died for the sins of whosoever will believe in him--and that "whosoever" includes you and it includes me.

One final thing. If God did a crazy thing like that for "whosoever", wouldn't we be crazy not to accept it? I want to ask you that question. Have you accepted Jesus. Maybe you are sidestepping Him this morning. Let me tell you about a man named Bill Glass. Some of you football fans will remember him as the All-Pro defensive end for the Cleveland Browns until he retired in 1968. Bill Glass said, "When I was about sixteen, I came face to face with one whom I could not sidestep." He describes it this way, "It's like playing defensive end for the Cleveland Browns. Usually when I charge across that defensive line either a tackle, an end or a back hits me. As I look up I see a 260 pound guard plunging toward me. His teeth are gritted, his head wags from side to side as he charges. I know he doesn't intend to do me any good. I know he intends to run over me and, if he can, knock me flat. And if I did the thing I really wanted to, I'd sidestep that guy to the outside...I don't really want to face all that power head on. But if I sidestep to the outside, he bumps me out a little further, and the back cuts to the inside and they make a lot of yards. On the other hand, I could sidestep him to the inside. But if I do, he'll cut me in and the back will cut to the outside and again they'll make a lot of yards. So the only thing that I can do is that most painful, that most boneshaking kind of thing; that is, face the big guard head on." Bill Glass goes on to explain that when the Bible says that whosoever believes, he didn't want to meet that head on. He says, "I wanted to sidestep Him to the outside and say, 'I'm not so bad. I go to church pretty often.'" Or perhaps I could sidestep Him to the inside and say, 'I'll turn over a new leaf. I'll change my way of living.' All of these things were simply sidestepping. So I had to face Jesus Christ squarely and say to Him one of two things: 'Sir, you are the biggest liar who ever lived.' or, 'Sir, you are the Son of God and the only possible way to get to God. Therefore, I will fall down and worship you as my Lord.' "

Yes, God did a crazy thing, he gave his Son that whosoever believes might not perish but have eternal life. That "whosoever" includes you--are you sidestepping God, or have you met that issue head on? You see, I don't know--but you do!