Sunday, March 10, 1991
GOD'S GOOD NEWS
John 3:14-21

If a survey were conducted asking people who know the Bible what their favorite Bible verse is, I suspect that John 3:16 would be high on the list: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

This passage has been called one of the best summaries of the central message of the Christian faith that can be found anywhere. Not only is this Bible verse a favorite for many people, but the reference John 3:16 is frequently seen in unusual places. For those who watch professional sports on television, perhaps you've noticed that in almost every game, there is someone who sits in a place where they know the camera will sometimes focus, holding up a large poster with "John 3:16" written on it. I've often wondered how many people who see it then go and get their Bible, find that passage, and read it.

This Bible verse reminds us of God's grace, of God's unconditional love not only for us but for all of creation. "God so loved the world." The passage does not say that God loves only church members of one denomination, or only Christians, or only good people, or only those who follow God's rules — but that God loves all of us and all that God has made. The passage further goes on to say that we cannot in any way earn God's love — it is freely and unconditionally offered. All we have to do is believe it and receive it. It is God's good news!

Yet there is a prevailing tendency among us to want to believe that we need to earn God's love or God's favor by performing certain religious duties. It's one of the persistent heresies within the Church, usually known as "works righteousness."

Recently, one of our church members told me about a conversation on religion she had with another person where she works. The individual told her that she read the Bible each day for one hour and that this was a necessary activity in order for a person to be saved, that is, to gain life after death in heaven.

Certainly, I agree that taking some time each day to read the Bible can be a very useful spiritual discipline and one that I would encourage for all of us. But to imply that doing so will earn us God's love or favor is not what God's good news is all about. Regular study of the Bible could certainly help us to be more aware of God's love for us and for all of creation and could aid us in becoming more loving toward others. In other words, it could change us, but it would not change God's love for us, which is unconditional and constant. It's like prayer. The purpose of prayer is not to change God but to change us. No prayer can make God more loving than God already is, or was in the past, or shall be in the future. Prayer, however, can attune us to spiritual forces around us and within us. It can help us to become more loving human beings.

Yet the belief that we somehow have to earn God's love has been an abiding one throughout the history of the Christian Church. Another way to state the heresy is that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious and therefore more righteous than the rest of us. It is the heresy of self-righteousness. Read the letters to the editor in the daily newspapers, and you can find many examples of this attitude.

This idea of having to earn God's favor was in the church almost from the beginning. It had also been present in the Hebrew tradition in the time of Jesus and before. In the New Testament stories, Jesus had constant disagreements with many of the religious leaders of his time. The Apostle Paul had to deal with it in many of the new congregations he helped organize. It's what the letter to the Galatians is all about in the New Testament.

It's the age-old question of the law versus grace. How can we as human beings find favor with God, who is holy? The answer of Jesus and early church leaders such as Paul was that we cannot in any way earn God's favor, love, or salvation by performing certain religious duties or by following the religious laws to the letter. Rather, God's love, God's favor is a pure, unconditional gift—"God so loved the world."

The character of God that Jesus revealed and lived made him a religious revolutionary in his time. For some reason, we human beings always tend to make God in our own image — we make God a monarch, a law-giver, a God who keeps track of every little infraction of the rules, a God who is going to "get you" if you don't obey.

Jesus and the leaders of the early church, like the Apostle Paul, proclaimed that we can be free of these misconceptions. We do not have to work to appease an angry or jealous God. Yet there were individuals at work in the congregation at Galatia, for example, who said that Paul was all wrong. They said that people had to earn God's favor by fulfilling certain religious rules and laws. They went on to say that one could not even become a member of the church until certain requirements of the law had been fulfilled. It caused Paul to write, "O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you... it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for he or she who by faith is righteous shall live."

And to the congregation in Ephesus, he wrote, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us, made us alive together with Christ — for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

But the heresy would not go away. Martin Luther in the 16th century had to combat it, and his doing so contributed to the Protestant Reformation. In Luther's time, the predominant belief in the church was that one could only gain God's favor by fulfilling certain prescribed religious requirements. The grace and love of God were almost forgotten.

I've often wondered why this heresy has been and still is so persistent? One reason might be that if you believe that by performing certain religious duties, you can earn God's love, then by doing so, you can make yourself better than others. Jesus told a story that illustrates this point. He said there was a very religious man who prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people. I fast twice a week, I say my prayers every day, I give money regularly to the church."

Another reason this heresy is popular is that it has been used by the institutional church to gain power. If one can gain God's favor through fulfilling certain religious duties, and if the church is the agency that defines what those duties are and keeps track of whether or not you are doing all the right things, then the church appears to have a monopoly on salvation. And this is exactly what had happened in Luther's time. The church taught that an individual had no direct access to God but could obtain God's favor and eternal life only through the rules and requirements that the church had set down.

But if individuals have direct access to God as Jesus taught, and if God loves and accepts all people no matter who they are, what church they attend or don't attend, or what kinds of sins they have committed, that's something quite different. It makes the church a different kind of organization. It no longer is an agency with a monopoly on God's love, or the gatekeeper to heaven; rather, the church is a community of people who have accepted God's love and forgiveness and want to spread that love and joy to others. The church becomes inclusive rather than exclusive. Then a primary function of the church is to tell others about this loving and forgiving God. The church exists to live and spread God's good news.

Earlier in the Gospel of John, we are told that the love of God became a human being and lived among us. In other words, Jesus was God's love focused in a human being, and thus Jesus demonstrated that God is more than an object of worship; God is also a loving presence dwelling in each one of us. God is also a loving presence that surrounds us, a loving power that permeates creation. It's the opposite of such references to God as "the man upstairs," or parents saying to their children, or the church saying to its members, "You had better be good or God will punish you."

Jesus revealed a God who "makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust." There is no place where God is not. God is not selective. God does not bring trouble into some people's lives and not into others. God is present to anyone who opens his or her life to God. And even if you try to escape God, God is there anyway.

Thus, you do not have to do anything to earn God's favor, love, or forgiveness. You already have that. You only have to accept it and be open to it. You are beloved of God simply because you exist. You can be described as the activity of God living itself out into expression as you. God loves you because God is love and because God created you, and thus love is your true nature also. Meister Eckhart put it bluntly when he said that he never thanked God for loving him because God cannot help it — because it is God's nature to love.

All of this is called God's grace. Grace is a way of defining the activity of God's love, which works for us and in us constantly. God's grace toward us is not dependent upon any special faith or prayer or works on our part.

Grace is there for all. By the grace of God, no matter how much you feel you have done wrong, you are still loved and forgiven by God. God's grace is not something you have to work for. You can't stop it or start it. It simply is. It's the reason things are never completely hopeless.

This is good news because it means you don't have to wait until your life is completely straightened out before you can experience God's grace. You don't have to worry about making something of yourself, or about being something special. This can make a big difference in how you live your life and do your job.

I once heard a personnel manager say that the first thing she tried to determine about a new employee was whether that individual was intent on "being something" or "doing something." She said, "The individual who is intent on being something is a person who does not have his or her ego needs met in a healthy way. Such employees are forever attempting to use the job in order to enhance themselves. These are people who are never able to risk anything or act courageously. All of their moves tend to be manipulative. When they come up to a given problem, they always perceive it on two levels. On the surface, they are asking, 'What needs to be done here?' But on a deeper level, they are asking, 'How can I use this situation to get

ahead myself?' These people have flawed vision, and very frankly, the higher they get in the decision-making process, the more of a liability they become."

"On the other hand, the individual who wants to do something is a person who has his or her ego needs met in a healthy fashion. They have themselves off their hands, so they are able to come to a problem situation and ask the single question, 'What needs to be done here?' These individuals are able to sacrifice. They are able to take risks. They are able to make the hard decisions. And though they are rare indeed, the quicker I can identify them and move them up in the decision-making process, the better it is for the business in the years to come."

That's an important distinction, and I would suggest that those individuals who have simply accepted the fact that God loves and accepts them, and that they need not earn God's favor because it is freely given, are the kind of people who are secure enough in their own self-esteem to be able to take risks and to make the hard decisions. They are not worrying all the time about how to enhance themselves.

When we experience God's grace, we learn that things do not have to be perfect to be good. We also learn that every gift we have been given would make a good present for someone else and that giving out of the fullness that is already in us only increases that fullness. The more you give, the more you have.

So today, simply accept God's good news, accept the fact that you are accepted and loved by God, no matter how unremarkable or unworthy you might feel. Amen.