



Christ's Community Church

FREED BY LOVE **Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21** **March 15, 2009**

Let us pray.

When I was eleven years old our family finally expanded to include a loving, energetic little West Highland White Terrier who we named Blizzard, or Blizzie, for short. Blizzie was as human a member of our family as a dog can possibly be except in one way: he would destroy any rodent that came on his radar! He ended the lives of more mice, rabbits, and even crickets than I care to count. After I had married and moved to Virginia, however, I heard second hand the story of an unusual relationship he had with a chipmunk who took up residence in my parents' garage. "Chippie," as my parents named this chipmunk, proved to be wily, brave, and bold. And Blizzie couldn't catch him.

Well, this drove Blizzie crazy so my parents finally realized that for Blizzie's health, as well as for their garden's health, they'd have to set a trap for Chippie. They decided, though, to mercifully go with a live trap. Dad set the trap with a piece of his delicious chocolate chip cookies and waited a day to see what would happen. No Chippie.

So the next morning Dad added a dollop of peanut butter. Sure enough, Chippie fell for that bit of temptation because that night his intelligent little eyes looked out at everyone from behind the doors of the Hav-a-Hart live trap! Mom then suggested that Dad give Chippie a piece of apple or something before he took him to the woods, just so Chippie would know they had no evil intentions toward him.

"You've got to be kidding!" said my astounded father who did not grow up with such a gentle approach to rodents. But no, Mom wasn't kidding. She said it seemed like



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the merciful thing to do and mentioned that maybe such compassion for a frightened little chipmunk would come in handy on the day Dad arrived at the pearly gates. Dad didn't seem to think he needed that kind of insurance, but went ahead with Mom's suggestion.

Well, the saga of Chippie didn't end there. That evening Mom asked Dad how the release into the wild went. Dad replied, "Well, it seems that Blizzie has more mercy than you and I put together." "What do you mean?" Mom asked. Dad explained, "I was getting ready to put Chippie in his cage into the car, and Blizzie got away from me. He made a mad dash for the cage and pounced on it. When he hit it, the door flew open, and Chippie took off, right back into the garden."

Now, it is true that Blizzie's motive was probably his own killer instinct, but as long as we don't carry the analogy too far, his actions are quite the model for mercy, aren't they? And although I would hesitate to compare Blizzie with Jesus, the comparison between us and Chippie is pretty hard to miss. We are very much like Chippie, trapped in sin by our own greed. But, also like Chippie, we have someone who frees us from that trap of sin. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has forever sprung that trap for us so we can always walk out of it if we have faith in him.

Well that's pretty much what the Scripture reading from John is talking about today, isn't it? It's the heart of the Gospel message, the center point of our faith: God loves us so much he sent his Son to die so that we could be freed from the trap of sin. That's it! It's a straightforward, welcome theology all contained in one great sentence! But although John 3:16 is one of the best known Scriptures, there is a lot more to what Jesus is saying here if we look at the less well known Scriptures surrounding it. For while these verses in John tell us about the salvation available to us if we believe in Jesus,



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they also lay out for us why we *need* that salvation in the first place. We need Jesus to save us because we are sinners, and not just run of the mill, tell a little white lie here and there kind of sinners. No, we need to be saved because we are trapped by our own sin. We love the darkness just like Chippie loved the peanut butter cookie. By loving darkness, we reject Jesus Christ who is the light of our world. So there is the one side of this passage that lets us feel great about the mercy of God, who loves us so much he sent his Son to die for us, but we can't ignore the other half of the story that says, the whole reason we need that mercy is because of our own sin and the judgment that brings.

So let's look at bit more closely at the context of John 3:16 because it sets up this dichotomy of light vs. darkness, salvation vs. sin so clearly. At the beginning of chapter 3, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a Jewish teacher, came to Jesus with questions about who he was. Nicodemus knew that Jesus must be from God because of the signs he had witnessed him doing, but he didn't understand how that could be possible. Jesus tried to tell Nicodemus that in order to understand, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven one must be born anew of water and Spirit. Nicodemus, being rather literal, didn't quite understand and asked "But how can a person be born a second time?"

So having seen that Nicodemus didn't get it, Jesus laid out who he is and why he is in the world with these beautiful verses beginning with John 3:16. In them he explained what he's talking about in terms of light and darkness. In verses 16-21, Jesus tells Nicodemus that God loves the world but the people of the world love darkness and so reject God's light. That rejection is our sin, it is the reason we are subject to God's judgment, and it is why we need Jesus to save us. And *because* Jesus loves us, he will save us. His light cannot be overcome by the world's darkness.



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These descriptions should resonate well with Nicodemus, the man who has come rather oddly and stealthily to Jesus in the dark. Try to picture that scene: there were no street lights or general glow from a bunch of stores in the area. Instead, Nicodemus and Jesus were in the deep darkness of night, possibly with just one lamp burning so as not to disturb the rest of the household. And Jesus used these concepts of light and dark to answer Nicodemus' questions, questions that not only wondered about Jesus' very identity but also how it was possible to enter the kingdom of God. And Jesus' answer was that in order to come into the kingdom, to witness the light of Jesus, to understand who he is, a person must be transformed in the Spirit so that he or she no longer loves darkness but loves the light.

Framing this explanation in terms of darkness and light is a wonderful way to talk about salvation and sin not only to Nicodemus but to us, too. Jesus could have simply said, "Look, you are utterly depraved sinners who reject God every time you disobey him. You need to be saved." And he would have been right! We do live in a world that loves darkness rather than light. We do live in a world that daily faces the consequences of our love of darkness, our rejection of God through our own desire to sin. We sin again and again, rejecting Jesus by our silence, by our idolatry and love of things, by our own selfish desires. We cannot ignore our own culpability and pretend like everything is just fine and dandy when Jesus is crucified over and over again by our own words and deeds. But Jesus puts the mercy and love of God back at the center of it all...that is the emphasis here and it's why we emphasize it in our church's theology. Through the mercy of God's love, we DO have the hope of breaking out of the darkness of sin. Jesus' answer to



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Nicodemus may move resolutely from salvation to judgment of sin. But it moves back to salvation and stays there because our darkness can never overcome his light.

Come back with me for a moment to Chippie the intrepid chipmunk because I haven't told you the end of his story yet. My dad went ahead and set the trap again after Chippie's dramatic escape. And sure enough, Chippie fell for the peanut butter bait a second time, trapped once again by temptation, just like we are lured by our light-hating world to step back into the darkness of sin. But Chippie's story ends well, just like ours does. Chippie was set free again, this time a few towns over in a field by my dad, but free nonetheless.

Like Chippie, we will have to battle the lure of sin, the comfort of darkness...or peanut butter cookies...every day of our lives. Some days we will find it easier than others to dwell in Jesus' light. Other days we will really have to struggle with that darkness. But what will always be constant will be our hope in the light because when Jesus died on the cross, he pounced on the cage that held us captive to our sins, knocked open the door to life eternal, and set us free—completely free. His ultimate mercy withholds all the punishment or judgment we deserve as long as we believe. In Jesus we are free us from the darkness of sin. We are free to believe in him, we are free to choose to walk away from darkness, away from sin and dwell richly in the light and truth of Jesus Christ. We are free to tell sin to take a hike, that it has no hold over us anymore. We are free to choose to offer mercy and love to others. We are free to look on the mistakes we have made in the past, at the times we have walked back into that peanut butter filled trap, and even at the mistakes we will make in the future and know that they do not have to define us or keep a permanent hold over us.



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Charles Wesley wrote the words to the hymn we are about to sing that reflect the verses in John 3 beautifully. He wrote, “Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature’s night. Your sunrise turned that night to day; I woke—the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, your voice I knew; was freed, I rose, and followed you.” What an incredibly description of our sin and our salvation in Jesus Christ. In him, we are free! Freed by love from the chains that bind us to darkness, freed by love to love others and to testify to Jesus’ light.

As long as we believe in Jesus he will free us from sin and there will be no condemnation in him. He has brought his light into this dark world so that we may no longer be bound by our sin. If you hear nothing else today, hear this: God loves you. He loves you so much he died for you so that you would be free to walk as his child in the light. May we follow the light of Jesus Christ, sharing it with others, bringing his brightness to the blackest places in our dark world, so that others may also know just how much Jesus loves them. Amen.