

March 15, 2020

Third Sun. of Lent

John 3: 14-21

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help us to live into the wideness of your mercy, the depth of your love. Help us to see it, hear it, feel it, then live it out. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Arms Wide Open

Next week, Bon Secours on the Eastside will get its third and final sculpture of *Ascending Christ*. It is by our friends, the father-and-son team of Charlie and Charles Pate.

The first sculpture went up at the Bon Secours Cancer Center in Mauldin in 2014. The second replaced a fountain in the circular drive at St. Francis Downtown in 2017. And now *Ascending Christ* will greet visitors at the Patewood campus.

The statue is eleven feet tall. Jesus' face is raised and he looks heavenward. Nail holes vividly mark his feet. But most striking, his arms are spread nine feet wide.

It is not unlike the iconic *Christ the Redeemer* outside Rio de Janeiro. That statue stands 98 feet tall in concrete and soapstone, and it overlooks the Brazilian city like a guardian angel.

It was designed by French sculptor Paul Landowski, and took from 1922 to 1931 to complete. Originally, the idea was to have Christ holding a globe and a cross. But instead his hands are open and empty, his arms outstretched.

92 feet across.

Those wide open arms are a symbol of openness, protection, nurture. They all but scream, “Come unto me.”

Why do our artists depict Jesus this way? Certainly, I think it’s reminiscent of the cross. The linear body line and the outspread arms mimic the shape of the cross, mimic Jesus’s own body as it hung there.

But these images are not the slumping body that hung on the cross. Like Ken Christy’s carving (*on display during worship*), these

images show a resurrected Christ, alert, sturdy, vibrant. And most important, invitational.

Those open arms invite us in. Those open hands lift us up.

What I'd like us to think about this morning is what it would mean for us to live with our arms wide open.

Can we live with our arms as wide open as those of the Pates' *Ascending Christ*, as wide open as *Christ the Redeemer* who overlooks Rio? *What would it mean to live with our arms wide open?*

When my children were growing up, I'd ask them, "Do you know how much I love you?"

When they were little, they'd play along. "This much?" (*holding hands a foot apart*) "This much? This much?"

When they were older, of course, they'd roll their eyes. "Not again." But they'd usually answer, "Yeah, Mom, we know. As far as your arms can stretch."

They were bored, even embarrassed, by my love. But they knew there was no end to its wideness.

Our Scripture passage this morning is about the width of God's love, the length, the depth. Please turn in your Bibles to **John 3: 14-21**.

This passage starts in the middle of a conversation Jesus was having with the Pharisee Nicodemus, who came to visit him one night. This is Jesus talking.

¹⁴ "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God *so loved the world* that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in

him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹ “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

²¹ “But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

This first verse about Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness refers to an odd little Old Testament story in the book of Numbers. The children of Israel were wandering in the desert. They complained against God and Moses for leading them to die there rather than back in Egypt. The Lord – angered by their recalcitrance -- sent poisonous snakes to bite them. Many of them died.

Terrified, the people repented.

So, at the Lord's bidding, Moses made a bronze snake and placed it high upon a pole. Whoever was bitten could look on the bronze snake and survive his snake bite.

Very strange story. But now in the gospel of John, Jesus refers to it as a reminder of a time when God provided a way for his people to be saved.

“... just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

And then follows our gospel in a nutshell, John 3:16.

“For God *so loved* the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Those are important words. That is important theology. John 3:16 is the heart of our gospel.

Former Florida Gator quarterback Tim Tebow painted it on his face.

In-N-Out Burgers printed it on the bottom of their ice cream cups, and Forever 21 on their shopping bags.

Monster Jam driver Devin Jones painted it on the side of his truck, Barbarian.

Country artist Keith Urban sang, “I learned everything I needed to know from John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16.”

Just about any meeting I go to these days, someone asks, “What’s the takeaway?” “What one message do we want people to leave with?”

Much as I hate that kind of thing, it has made me ponder, *What do I want to be the takeaway from my time at Triune?*

John 3:16 is not a bad one. ***For God so loved the world....***

You know, there is plenty in the Bible that confuses us. Like why God sent poisonous snakes to bite people.

But once you peel all that away, you are left with one stark truth, one overriding message: **“For God *so loved* the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”**

If we truly believe that God loves us, how do react? How do we live? How do we interact with people?

I'd say it has to do with body language. It has to do with living with our arms wide open. It has to do with living like *Christ the Redeemer* overlooking Rio, like *Ascending Christ* overlooking our hospital campuses.

Think about crossing your arms over your chest. You can't hug. You can't touch someone's shoulder. You can't pat someone's arm.

Think about your hands. When you make a fist, it is certainly a more powerful weapon than an open hand.

A fist is also the best way to hold on tight to something. A fistful of dollars, maybe.

But a clinched fist can't receive anything more. Either to give or to receive, that fist has to unfurl. That palm has to open. Our fingers have to be free.

Think about picking up a child. We usually pick her up by the torso, underneath her arms.

We can't do that with closed fists. We can't do that with crossed arms.

We can lift someone only when our own stance is open. We can lift someone only when our arms are free to be flung wide.

As you know, we get a lot of visitors through Triune. People wanting to volunteer or people considering funding us or even people wanting to adapt some of our ideas for their own ministries.

I repeat to them what a homeless man once said to me. He asked, "Pastor, do you know the worst thing about being homeless?"

It's not being cold or wet or hungry. The worst thing about being homeless is ... being looked right through."

And so I tell our visitors, "We try every way we can think of to look. We try every way we can think of *to lift people up.*"

That's what's behind our art room. That's what's behind Round Table and Triune Circles. That's what's behind Playback Café. That's what's behind so much of what we do: Trying to lift people into the light.

That's what today's Scripture passage is about.

"... the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

²¹But those who do what is true come to the light...."

In John's gospel, we read extensively about light and dark. It was one of his favorite contrasts, favorite metaphors. The light that is

Jesus came into a dark world. To know, to understand, to accept Jesus's love, is to move into the light.

But to know, to understand, to accept Jesus's love, I think, requires a little more. It requires that we share that light, reflect that light. It requires that we attempt to lift those around us into the light. To allow them to bask in the light that is Jesus just as we have basked.

And we cannot lift with crossed arms and clinched fists.

To live with arms open wide, with hands unfurled, is a choice. We choose to live generously, lovingly. Or not.

To live with arms open wide might be as simple as having lunch or a conversation with someone outside our comfort zone.

Or it might be as full-blown as joining Triune Circles when it starts up in June.

By definition, our Triune Circles volunteers live with their arms wide open. After all, they commit a full year to lift someone up.

What we didn't realize in the beginning was something equally important: These volunteers have allowed our Circles leaders to open their arms as well.

Two weeks ago I talked about one of our Circles graduates, Morgan Graham, who baked biscuits for our volunteer breakfast in February. Well, apparently a lot of you went over to Tommy's Ham House afterward and told her she was the subject of the sermon. So she came to my office first thing the next morning.

And she was telling me even more of the great things that are happening in her life. Some of our Circles volunteers bought a condo on the Eastside and are renting it to Morgan at a very low price. And she said a lot of her customers at Tommy's have furnished it.

One woman asked, "Can you use an old broken down coffee table?" Morgan said sure. But when it arrived – with two matching end tables – all three were wrapped in plastic from the furniture store.

They were brand new.

It's fun to lift someone whose face is turned to the light.

But of course not everyone is turned to the light.

Jesus knew it. ²⁰**For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed.”**

But I suppose there would be no reason for church if there wasn't the possibility of turning to the light. Three weeks ago, I got a phone call from a voice from our past – a man we had helped with rehab, a job and a red pickup truck back in 2007.

Joe called from Columbia to say he'd been in prison, but he was now living in the shadow of Williams Brice Stadium and doing well. He wanted to apologize for losing that truck. And 13 years later, he wanted to say thank you for the help we'd given him – even though he hadn't been ready to accept it at the time.

I think that the reason most people don't live with arms wide, hands open, hearts exposed ... is fear. They've seen the dark that Jesus spoke of, that Joe lived, and they know its dangers.

I'm not saying that living this way is without risk.

Our younger daughter Madison lives in San Diego and travels into Mexico every few weeks for work. She backpacked for eight weeks through Nicaragua and Guatemala. She hiked in Patagonia, and attended Carnivale in Rio de Janeiro in the shadow of *Christ the Redeemer*. After living in Korea for two years, she traveled leisurely through Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand as she made her way home.

During each of those trips, I emailed her daily: *Don't talk to strangers! Don't party with local boys! Don't tell anybody your real name!*

Of course, she ignored me.

She ignored me because back when it mattered, back when her little heart was deciding who Madison would be, her dad and I told her: "Do you know how much you are loved?"

"Wider than our arms can stretch.

“Wider than the whole wide world.”

Who knew she was listening?

Amen.