

When I was a little boy there were eight ordinary words that my father would string together in a sentence. They were like magic. I would drop whatever I was doing for those eight words, which went like this: "I need you to go to the store."

Many of you know that I grew up in a single parent home. My Dad was often too physically ill or tied to his home dialysis machine to go to the store, so he would send me.

Through the woods at the end of our neighborhood was a path that eventually came out near our community general store. It was part hardware store; part grocery store; part Disneyworld for a little boy. There were shelves of toys and candy with so many colors just to stare at. Outside, the owner's father had a really cool, World War 2 era antique truck which I never saw him get out of second gear. There was a real glass phone booth where I could pretend to change into superman, just like in the comic books. In the back of the store next to the meat counter there was a wood stove. In the winter the local farmers would sit around that stove and tell hilarious stories. I would ease down their way and pretend to read the cereal boxes while eavesdropped on them. I knew if I listened long enough I would surely pick up new, colorful words I wasn't supposed to know and then I could go back to the neighborhood and impress all the other kids in my neighborhood with those words. My Dad usually only sent me to get milk and bread or milk and eggs because that's all I could carry, but I always got so much more at the general store.

Because of my father's illnesses and the mountain of medical expenses that came with them, there were times we couldn't afford to go to the store. There were times when we would pray the Lord's prayer and "give us today our daily bread" wasn't just a pretty thing to say. It was a literal request.

I have forgotten many things in my life, but there is one moment I will never forget. In my mind I can still see pretty much every detail. It was the first time that I went to get groceries and something different happened at the checkout counter.

The husband and wife who owned the store were always at work there. She usually worked at the checkout counter. Her name was Elsie and she never got in a hurry. She was always very slow and deliberate with how she would look at the price tags and then punch in the amounts on the cash register.

One day my father sent me in to get some things without any money. He told me to make sure to tell Elsie who I was. Instead of ringing me up like normal, she turned around to the antique cash register behind her. It had big round buttons. She pressed one and the old cash drawer opened up. She took out a ledger book and started slowly writing down the items I had and that was that. I was just free to go with them.

By the time I reached my Dad, I had so many questions. *What was this new thing where we could get food without money?* That was easy. He told me it was called credit. *How did we suddenly get it?* That required a little more explaining. There was a group called the Ladies Aid Society. Before he got sick my father had been a caretaker on some property across the road from Saint John in the Wilderness in Flat Rock. We lived on that property when I was born. One of the extra jobs my father did was that he sometimes helped out the sexton at St. John in the Wilderness.

After he got sick and my mother left, some of the ladies in that parish heard about the hard times we were having so they set up two monthly charge accounts for us. One at Dewey Sherman's store on Greenville Highway and other at Hill's General Store in East Flat Rock. They wanted to make sure we had what we needed.

The last question I had for my Dad was the one that has stayed with me all of my life and it has shaped everything that I do and who I am: *Why?* As a little boy, I was perplexed. I seriously wanted to know WHY complete strangers would care about people they didn't even know? We weren't related. We didn't go to church with them. We weren't even Episcopalians. They didn't seem to want recognition or praise. As far as I know, they never asked us for anything. They just helped us keep going.

I remember my father's answer. He said, "I guess it's because they're just very loving people." My Dad's answer has hovered over my life ever since then. When I think of the word, "love", I still think of the Ladies Aid Society of Flat Rock. They weren't just some people talking warm fuzzy thoughts about love. They showed it by giving. They expressed love by putting bread on our table.

In our Gospel reading today we hear what the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ is all about: "God so loved the world" that God "gave" and then a little later it says God "sent."

My sisters and brothers, loving is giving; loving is sending. That's how John 3:16 defines it.

Love ceases to be some invisible, abstract notion when we send something we value, away from ourselves to someone else. Love takes tangible shape through giving.

John 3:16 makes it clear that generous self-giving is how God's love was and is communicated.

Giving is the universal vocabulary that God has given us to speak love in a way that transcends all languages and barriers.

Love isn't about finding the most beautiful words to say. I'm a big fan of beautiful words, but ultimately, love is expressed by what we give away.

That doesn't mean every kind of giving is always about love.

There are many different ways of giving and some of them are not loving or life-giving, but the kind of giving that John 3:16 is talking about is **different**.

It's not transactional.

It's not controlling.

It isn't some kind of investment.

It's not about getting something in return.

It isn't about trying to figure out who is worthy or deserving of our giving.

It's simply God so loved the WORLD that God gave. Period.

The more we try to qualify it, restrict it or limit it, the farther we move away from John 3:16.

Love transforms our giving because it enlarges it. It makes it about something bigger than ourselves.

That's the direction in which today's Gospel invites us to move.

My sisters and brothers, every year during Lent we're accustomed to thinking about what we're supposed to give up for Lent, but that's really only half of the story.

Lent isn't only about what we choose to turn away from. It's also about what we are willing to turn toward. It's not just about letting go of something. It's about embracing something new.

I think it's unfortunate that so much of our talk about repentance only emphasizes the negative. I heard it put this once: Repentance is like a dressing room. We don't just go in and change out what we've been wearing; we replace it. We put on something new.

What if this year we tried on something radical for Lent? What would it look like if we were intentional about practicing the largeness of John 3:16?

In a time when we're becoming increasingly polarized and we're encouraged to become more spiteful, what if we turned toward the pattern of God's love described in this verse?

Surely we all feel the pull of stingy currents at work all around us. It feels like no matter what we do, we keep dividing up into little tribes and sub-tribes and boxes within those sub-tribes. Our world is getting smaller and smaller, but John 3:16 calls us to go in the exact opposite direction.

It's not, "God so loved the ones who look like me, talk like me, think like me and like what I like."  
It's God so loved the WORLD!

There is no withholding in the heart of God, only a large and broad generosity open to a world full of all kinds of people and all kinds of situations.

Love is giving. Love is sending, but that doesn't mean it's easy.

If you love like God does, you will get your heart broken. John 3:16 says keep loving anyway.

If you love like God does, you will probably be misunderstood and maybe even be ridiculed as being naive. That's okay. John 3:16 is our encouragement to keep loving anyway.

If you love like God does, you may never see any result from your generosity. John 3:16 says keep giving anyway.

When we love like God loves, our giving touches something eternal. It connects us to something more than what we can see on our immediate horizon.

Here is what I know about that: 45 years ago, I never met any of those members of the Ladies Aid Society whose generosity helped carry my father and I through very difficult times.

I don't know the names of the people who made the decision to help us, but their love impacted my life in ways that are almost beyond calculation.

They are a big part of why I am in my current vocation.

They're a big part of why I am an Episcopalian today.

They share a part in everything I do in ministry today because as a little boy, I grew up knowing that I was loved by people who didn't even know me.

Imagine that!

God so loved the world that God gave. My sisters and brother, so should we.

It really is that simple and it really is that hard.

Amen