

22 March 2009  
Lent 4  
Baptism of Ch'am GoEun Irene Rottmann

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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"True Love"

Text: John 3:14-21; Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Love is hard work. Love is not always sweetness and flowers and joy. It's sometimes down and dirty, I'd-really-rather-not-be-doing-this, self-giving work.

Because love doesn't stay on the honeymoon, on in the hospital room the day your baby is born. You find out what love is when "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health" becomes the worse, the poorer, and the sickness. You find out what love is at 3 am when the poopy diaper has exploded and run own your child's leg and you find out that what you hoped would be a quick change and then back to sleep becomes much more than that. That's when you find out what love is, for it is at those times when love is more than an emotion, but an action. An action that gives up yourself for the sake of the other - not because you feel like it, or because they deserve it, but because that's what love does.

And that's when you find out that love is not only hard work, but can also be painful work. Sleepless nights painful, worried-to-death painful, and painful when that child you gave up so much for rebels - and the love you gave is not returned.

It's important to keep all of that in mind when you then hear *these* words: "**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son.**" That is such a well-known verse that perhaps we don't pause to reflect on what it really means, and *all* that it means. Because this love was not easy. This love cost God a great deal. But it is in God that we see what true love really is. The love that is the model for our marriages. The love which all of our love is only a pale reflection. The love of God that could not just allow us to go off in our sins and so be lost forever - but acted, got down-and-dirty in our sins, and gave of Himself for our sake. Not because we deserve it, but because we don't. Because that's what love does. Especially the love of God.

And if you think you deserve His love . . . well, you just haven't been paying attention - either to His Word, or to your life. *Because you just aren't that lovable.* For you and me - all of us - are the unfaithful spouse that put the worse, poorer, and sickness into the marriage of Christ and His bride, the church. We're the ones who

have exploded in sins and are so filthy and smelly and covered in muck. We're the rebellious children who have not returned our Father's love, but instead have chosen our own way in this world, thinking that our Father in Heaven doesn't know so much, is stuck in the past, and just doesn't want us to have any fun, and we know better. Sound familiar parents? Yeah, maybe a little too much.

In the Old Testament reading from Numbers, we heard of when Israel rebelled like that. All God had done for them was rescue them from bitter slavery in Egypt, bring them through the Red Sea and destroy the pursuing Egyptian army, give them bread to eat and water to drink - and what did He get back? Rebellion and grumbling. We do it too, when the life and gifts God gives to us aren't good enough for us; when we want what the other guy has; when we think we deserve better.

So what did God do? He sent fiery serpents among them to bite them. *Which doesn't sound so loving* . . . until you consider the alternative - to let them go in their sins; to let them destroy themselves and rebel and sin themselves to death. But God loved them. Loved them still, despite their grumbling and rebellion, and so did what was hard and painful. He sent the serpents to wake them up and turn them back to Him - the tough love and discipline they needed to live - because the road they were on was going to only lead to their death. But not only that, God then also gave them the way to life - a bronze serpent on a pole. A bronze serpent which by itself is just a bronze serpent - but when the Word of God and the promise of life are attached to it, and faith looks to and clings to that Word and promise, **becomes a way of forgiveness and life**. A way of pointing them to and attaching them to the God who so loved them that He would not let them go. Even when that love was work. Even when that love was painful.

And that, as Jesus tells us, is an Old Testament picture of what *He* has done for us. For us who have been bitten by the fiery serpent named satan and injected with his poison and death, there is a way to life - **not a serpent on a pole, but the Son of God on the pole of the cross**. And so far greater is the Son than the bronze serpent, for the life He provides there is so much greater - not just physical life, but spiritual life. Not just life in this world for a while, but eternal life. For on the cross He has taken our worse and given us His best. He has taken our poverty and given us His riches. He has taken our sickness unto death and given us His healthful forgiveness and life. And so "till death do us part" has no part in the wedding vows of Christ and His bride, the church, for in Him, not even death can part us - His resurrection is the proof and the guarantee.

That love of Christ for us was work, and it was painful. The rejection and rebellion, the scourging and scorn, the cross and the condemnation - but Jesus took it all in love; He took it all that we might live. That all who look to Him in faith and cling to Him **should not perish, but have eternal life**. That just as the bronze serpent in the

wilderness be not a serpent of death but a serpent of life, so too the cross of Christ be transformed from a tree of death into a tree of life. Transformed by the love, the Word, and the promise of God our Saviour. That we no longer be slaves to sin, but sons and daughters of God.

That is the love and life that little GoEun received this morning in the washing of Holy Baptism. For there our Saviour attached His Word and promise and love and life to that otherwise ordinary water, and transformed it into life-giving water, rich in grace and forgiveness. And He made GoEun His own. The filth and stench and muck of sin washed away and forgiven, and a new life given to her. . . . Now, some would say she did not need this washing or life, for she is only a baby; she hasn't had a chance to sin. But sin is more than our actions - it is an infection, a disease, passed from parents to child, which, unless taken away, will lead to death. And GoEun, through no fault of her own, was born with this sin, as were we all.

But just as GoEun did not deserve the sin that she was born with - that was a "gift" from her parents - so too she did not deserve the new life that she was given today! That was a gift from her *Heavenly* Father, a gift of grace. That she too may look to her Saviour and all that He has done for her in faith. That she may see His incredible love for her. That she may rejoice in Him and live with Him forever. And so just as March 2, 2009 is an important day for her - the day of her birth; even moreso is March 22, 2009 an important day for her - the day of her new birth as a child of God; as one redeemed by Christ, the crucified. Today it is Easter for her - the day of her resurrection to a new life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And so it is with us, for all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus. We live a life that is no mere life, but a new life, a Christ-life. Granted, the way we live may not look it sometimes, when we fall back into sin, back into our old ways and thinking. But just like with Israel, our Father does not let us go, but calls us back - back to His forgiveness, back to His water, back to His food, back to his life. That the Word and forgiveness of Christ, and the body and blood of Christ, and the life of Christ, restore us. Not just once, but over and over again, each and every day receiving from Him what we need for the new life. The life that only He can give; the life that only He can sustain.

And that life *does* show in your life - for as St. Paul wrote: ***"we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*** And do you know what those good works are, that God prepared for you to do? We usually try to make them such a big deal! But they're really quite simple: changing poopy diapers at 3 am! Loving your spouse in the good times and the bad times. Honoring your parents. Helping your neighbor. Being a caring boss, or a faithful employee. Speaking good about others and defending them. Being generous with your time and money. For the new

life of Christ is simply living the life you have been given, with the people you have been given, in the place you have been put, in a new way. A Christ way. For to say "doing good works" is simply another way of saying "putting the love of Christ into action." Not because you feel like it, and not because the other guy deserves it, but because that's what love does, and that's who you now are. And you know what? It might be hard work, and it might be painful, but that's okay. Nobody said it was going to be easy.

But it will be good, because it is of Christ, and everything of Christ is good. So when you feel like grumbling and complaining, when you feel snake-bit, and even when everything is going good - **fix your eyes on Jesus**, your Saviour on the pole of the cross. From His love comes your love; from His life comes your life; from His strength comes your strength.

Look to Him and live.  
Look to Him, and live.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.