

“So Loved”  
Psalm 136; 1 Chron 17:3-14;  
Eph 2:3-10; John 3:10-21

December 22, 2013  
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I've been thinking about power. There's a saying that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This made me wonder, how do we fit that together with God, because in my estimation the only place where there's absolute power is with God.

I'll start out with that little conundrum. We struggle, I think, with power and with what it's about, so as we begin to think about who God is and what God might have done, there's almost a question about if God is all-powerful, is God truly good? Our psalmist today has no doubt. He starts out the psalm today, Psalm 136, with: give thanks for God is good; his steadfast love endures forever. So when we have trouble with God is it really trouble with God or power?

I want to think about the story we have: In the beginning God created and gave life and it was good. God is good. The story goes on. What happens? There is a place where some darkness enters in. Who has something to do with that? Us, right? Humanity. There's a way in which it's easier to want to say it must have been God's fault. It's always easier to say it's somebody else's fault. I don't want it to be *my* fault. Don't even really want to think about that too much, especially at this time of year. Yet, as I think about what these scriptures say to us, there is a darkness and it is something we can too easily participate in.

The psalm goes on to say that God remembers us in our low estate. Initially I read that and thought, that's nice. Then I thought, low estate? Me? Are we of low estate? I don't generally think of myself as low estate. I don't have great real estate, but it's not bad... There's this sense that God is coming to those in need, of low estate. Where is that in our lives? How do we want to acknowledge it?

If we read Paul, Paul is suggesting that we have all lived in the passions of the flesh and the senses. I want to suggest that what he's saying is that it's not just about our physical desires. His word for “flesh” really, I think, means more “mortality” or “humanity” or even society. There's a way in which it encompasses those things that draw us into particular ways of doing things. Certainly, the desires of our actual flesh do that, but we also learn ways of doing things as we grow and as we relate to one another and as we live within a particular society. The question is, are those things bright or dark? Are they things that coincide with what God calls us to and wants for us?

I'm always taken aback by a play or a musical like *Grease*, because it feels to me like what it's doing is celebrating the allure of the darkness. If you've seen it, it's about the biker dude saving the day and bringing the people over to his side. It's kind of about being wild and dark. There's that allure, isn't there? There's that sense that if we really want to live, we have to do something that's not quite right. It's as if when we're bad, somehow it's better.

It's interesting how the word “bad” has come to mean “better” in certain circumstances. But is it true? It feels to me like it's really a bait and switch. Because, sure, it can take us

to a place of a real adrenaline rush, maybe some excitement, even pleasure, but then there's a letdown, and we need to do it again. We have to live through that bottoming-out time to find the next time to do it. What Paul is suggesting is that that leads us to a life that produces deeds of evil. I want to suggest that it's not always clear-cut. Sometimes we are able to sustain a particular way of doing things. Let me try an example.

If the lights go out and it's dark and we need light, we can light a match. In the darkness, particularly, it's really kind of exciting to see the match start. So we have to do it again. In fact, I've heard that aboriginal folks who have seen this for the first time just want to keep doing it again and again. It's something amazing. If we have a life in which we can get all the supply of matches we want, we can just keep going. Soon we will have a pile of burnt matches, but the flame explodes and burns out. There is another way. We can keep the flame going to brighten the dark by lighting a lamp.

When God looks down upon us, does he see a people striking matches, trying over and over again to get the excitement of life, to hang on to a certain pleasure? Where does that lead? It doesn't lead to the sustained light of the lamp. When God looks down upon us, what does he see and how does he look? God so loved the world.

Way back in Chronicles, we hear this foreshadowing of God recognizing our need for one who can lead, our need for his Son. God so loved the world, in spite of all our match-striking, all of the ways we try to keep things going, things that lead us astray and even turn into evil deeds. God looked down on the world. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Or as Paul says it, with love so great with which he loved us.

I always have to remind myself when I think about that love that it's not a love of loyalty of family. It's not a love of loyalty of friend. It's not a love of passionate desire. It's a love of choice. I don't know exactly what it means to say that God had a choice, but that word "love" suggests that God had a choice and God made a choice to love and care for us, to value us, to see the good in us. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. I think it's so that we don't have to keep striking matches. We can begin to see where he leads us and to know that love. Think about it. When someone loves you, it enables you to live. It gives you a confidence. You experience a grace. God sent his Son.

God so loved the world that he gave his Son, not that we should perish but that we should have eternal life, real life, sustained life. We can have hope because he's come. We can have a life in which we can experience and begin to live into peace, and know the joy of that harmony because we are so loved.

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Lord, it's sometimes hard to even want to look at the possibility that we're of low estate, that we have struggles to deal with, that we're not right on the path, or that we're simply striking matches to try to keep things going in a way it feels like we don't know how to sustain. How do I keep going? Lord, help us turn to you and allow your light to come into our lives, to be that which lights us up and sustains us and guides us. Help us celebrate that we are so loved that you sent your only Son that we might know your way, your blessing, your grace. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.