

**Mar. 14, 2021
Christ the Servant, Reston
Lent 4**

**Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21**

I saw a lot of purple cows by the time I was five years old – or at least I thought I did. My favorite seat in the car was the armrest in the middle of the front seat. (I know this dates me!) This was before the time of kids’ car seats – even seat belts. Mother would be driving. Aunt Ardelle would be riding shotgun. I had a great panorama view of the road from my armrest seat and could see all the way down the highway. But, every so often my Aunt Ardelle would say, “Isn’t that a purple cow over there in the field?” So, I’d look off to the right side of the road where she was pointing. “Yes,” my mother would say. “It is, indeed, a purple cow.” Of course, as I looked off to the right, imagining that I too could see that cow, the ice cream stand would whiz by on the left without me noticing. Or the amusement park. Or anything else which might cause me to beg for the car to be stopped. I wasn’t real happy when I finally caught on, but I must admit that our own children were also shown many purple cows before they were five.

Sometimes it happens that we can be so focused on one thing that we miss another. I think this may be the case with a couple of verses from today’s readings. For instance, I think that John 3:16 has become a purple cow. This one verse is pointed to more than any other single verse in the entire Bible. Bumper stickers, hand-held signs, billboards, and bracelets have J-O-H-N 3 colon 1-6 printed on them. We can all say it by heart, can’t we: “For God so loved the world that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

I call such sign-waving, scripture-quoting “tee shirt theology” – or “bumper sticker theology.” It’s quick. It’s easy. And it pushes us toward treating religion as quick and easy. It is not. But the other thing that bothers me

about signs and bumper stickers is that they seem to be accusatory – even when the message is not. The signs and stickers always seem so self-righteous – as if the person waving, wearing, or driving the message is “in” and the rest of us are “out.” Mind you, “John 3:16” is a sight better than the old “Repent! For the kingdom of God is at hand!” And it is sure a whole lot better than that pious “In case of the rapture this car will be driverless.” Let me explain what that one means. Some people believe that Jesus will come back in what is called the “rapture” and, in an instant, the saved will be taken up into the clouds and the damned will be left on the earth. So, the driver is telling you that he will be in the clouds and you will be on the earth following his car which is now, presumably, weaving all over the road driverless. It’s that kind of “I’m-saved-and-you’re-not” theology I find offensive.

When we see or hear those things we need to look on the OTHER side of the road. We need to look at the verse which comes AFTER John 3:16. John 3:17. That one goes like this: “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.” This is the verse which gives us hope. Jesus didn’t come into the world to condemn, but to save. That was his mission, not to root out wrong-doers and sinners and expose them for what they are – but to die for these wrong-doers and sinners.

Jesus was announcing a new narrative. If the old one said that God sent lightning bolts and plagues to punish bad people, now he has sent his son whose mission is to bring the lost sheep to safety. A warrior’s bow no longer tells the story. A shepherd’s crook does.

Sometimes we Lutherans can be guilty of purple-cowism, too. For us Lutherans, our “John 3:16” is “Ephesians 2:8&9.” If you ever see somebody holding up a sign which says “Ephesians 2:8&9” you will know it is a Lutheran. Ephesians 2:8&9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works.”

That's the purple cow *we* are often so focused on that we miss the very next verse in that passage: Ephesians 2:10: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before him to be our way of life." If a Lutheran ever sees a Bible verse about good works coming at you on the left side of the road, he will direct your attention to the right side of the road. Lutherans know we are not saved by good works, but by faith.

A few years ago the Lutheran theologian, Martin Marty, said that ministers should stop reminding Christians that they cannot win salvation by good works, since nobody is trying hard anymore to do the good works." If we Lutherans would get out of our "bumper sticker theology" in regards to salvation by grace alone and faith alone, we would see that it is not quite that simple. Our Roman Catholic friends have reminded us that the whole purpose of grace and faith is a life of good works. Once we have faith that it is by the grace of God that we are saved, we naturally want to go out there and do those things God would have us do: love and help our neighbor. In 1999 we Lutherans actually signed an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church on the Doctrine of Justification. They agreed with us that it is by grace alone that salvation happens. We agreed with them that the end of grace and faith is works.

Soren Kiegegaard told the story about a flock of geese. Each Sunday it seems these geese would gather in the shade of the barn to hear the gander preach of the glorious destiny of geese. He would describe the grand purpose for which they were created, namely flying. Week after week they were enthralled by his messages about soaring above the clouds. Meanwhile, the geese were getting more and more plump until at Christmas time they were eaten and none of them ever experienced the exhilaration of real flight. They loved to hear about flying, but did not, themselves, fly. It's so wonderful to hear, week after week, that God so loved the world, etc, etc. It's so wonderful to hear, month after month, that "for by grace you have been saved through faith," but if all we

ever do is sit and listen and be comforted by the magic words, then we will never fly. We will just sit in the pew and be plump Lutheran Christians.

I invite you this morning to look on the other side of the road the next time someone points you toward a purple cow. Look at the whole picture. It is a living relationship with Christ to which church and scripture point. That faith-filled relationship with the one who brings us grace will lead us to do the things that faith-filled Christians do: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and fight on behalf of those who are oppressed. Let's let our faith shine forth in the ways we treat our neighbors. The little fish symbol on the back window of your car means nothing if you are not doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

Please allow me to close with a quote from Theresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."