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 First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, AL
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On Love and Snakes...
 John 3:13-21

Ice and snow are flying fast – it’s almost blizzard conditions.
 The harbor is frozen, which never happens this time of year.
 She’s not dressed warmly enough to keep out the cold,
 but still she stumbles forward, crying out, searching for the friend
 who might be able to save her by thawing the ice in her heart.
 KRISTOFF, she yells into the wind. KRISTOFF!
 Suddenly, the blowing stops. The fjord falls silent.
 In the distance, Anna sees not her true love, but her sister – Elsa --
 collapsed, grieving on the ice.

Spoiler alert...

Evil prince Hans unsheathes his sword,
 and Anna uses the last of her strength not to save herself, but to protect her
 sister,
 throwing herself in front of Hans to block his sword as her frozen heart turns
 her body into solid ice.
 The sword shatters,
 and Anna is alive again, having saved herself with an act of pure love,
 by sacrificing herself to save her sister.

Those of you without a child or grandchild in your house might not know
 that this is the climax of the movie Frozen.
 With two female leads who are both courageous and save the day,
 Frozen is an unusual children’s movie. Yet it draws on a familiar archetype
 – that of the martyr, who sacrifices herself out of love.

This archetype of loving self sacrifice shows up again and again in our
 stories: think of Harry Potter facing down he-who-shall-not-be-named, or
 Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, risking their lives to save middle
 earth in the Lord of the Rings. This idea shows up again and again in our
 greatest stories, a willingness to die to save another. We love this archetype.
 It captivates us, perhaps because we’re not sure we could do it. Evil is
 powerful, death inevitable, our time on earth is fleeting... but our instinct for
 self preservation is *so strong!*

And it's possible to see this sacrificial archetype in our text this morning: when John says "the son of man must be lifted up," John means Jesus must be crucified. God came to us in Christ out of love for the world, and was willing to die to save us.

John 3:16 is, to some, the summation of the gospel story. But I've gotta be honest, I think that it leaves a lot of the good stuff out. Like, the life and teachings of Jesus. If we just have John 3:16, we miss out on that. In the context of the rest of the gospels, though, we see God's love for the world play out through a great teacher, powerful preacher, compassionate healer, driven activist. We see love so challenging that the powerful in Rome had no choice but to kill him. We see resurrection!

This passage might be loved by many, but it holds everything that confounds me about scripture:

- 1) an obscure reference to an Old Testament story, wherein God sends snakes to bite, poison, and kill disobedient Israelites for grumbling about being lost in the desert, but then saves the people by instructing Moses to make a bronze snake to hold up on a stick so that all who look at it will be healed. Strange Old Testament reference - Check!
- 2) A history of being used as a proof text to condemn other people – the opposite of what it's original intent might have been – prone to proof texting - check!
- 3) Surface-level support for substitutionary atonement theology that begs reinterpretation. Bad theology- Check.

And yet, when we sift through the complicated Johannine logic, we find a beautiful vision of God's love for the whole world, and God's desire for us to be healed, and whole, and safe. We end up with truth that gives meaning, challenge, and direction to our daily living.

See, the snake lifted up in the wilderness is an image of healing. This story from the book of Numbers is thought by some scholars to be the source of the rod of Aesclepius – a snake-wrapped staff wielded by the Greek god of healing and medicine, Aesclepius. This image of the snake-wrapped staff adorns the seal of the World Health Organization, blue cross/blue shield, and many other medical groups. Moses' uplifted bronze snake healed the

people. So in comparing Christ on the cross to the snake on a stick, John intends for us to see the crucifixion as an act of healing.¹

As we look towards Holy Week and prepare for Good Friday, I have to wonder if we might find healing in the crucifixion in two ways: God's selfless love made real for us in Christ, even unto death – the ultimate self sacrificing archetype. In the cross, God shows how humans blame others for our own mistakes, and attempt to solve problems with violence. But it doesn't work. It isn't right. Seeing that truth laid bare for all to see should heal us of our love of sinning, shouldn't it? what's more, the text tells us twice:

whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

What does it mean to believe?

Is it a mental act? An ascription of faith in an ontological concept out of concern for the afterlife? Accepting Jesus into your heart? The belief God commends to us is bigger than that.

When I was pregnant with Maddie, a member of my last church said – you'll need to get used to the feeling of having your heart out in the world. Having children is like letting your heart walk around outside of your body. Loving anyone can be like that.

God did not give God's self, God's only son, God's heart to us just so that we could *say* we believe. God came to us in Jesus out of love for the world, to save humankind with love. That we might find healing and authenticity as beloved children of God. That we might believe that we are loved, and love others in return. This knowledge allows us to remain true to who and whose we are.

Food writer Michael Pollan tells a story about authenticity and living consistently – he's famous for his exposes on factory farming and the problematic way we eat in 21st Century America. His food rules are – eat

¹ See what I mean about this passage being confounding? There was a woman who lost her boa constrictor on the Red Line of the MBTA when I lived in Boston. People were on the lookout for weeks for that thing. There was nothing healing about it.

real food, mostly plants, not too much. He tells about going shopping in the Berkley Bowl, which is a food coop in Berkley, CA, and needing to buy some cereal for his son. An occasional treat for his son was fruity pebbles cereal. He says he took the Fruity Pebbles off the shelf and was reaching down to put them in his cart when a tall, bearded graduate student behind him says, “I’m watching Michael Pollan shop for groceries...”

His public persona was – natural foods, organic, no GMO’s, no high fructose corn syrup, etc – but in real life, he was the kind of guy who would buy fruity pebbles for his son. And that’s okay – everything in moderation! But Pollan says he was mortified. Fruity Pebbles should not have been in his cart.

Belief calls for consistency: we are true to our identity in Christ, no matter where we are or what we’re doing. We remember that we are loved by God and we act accordingly. We believe that God loves us, and not just us, but the world. Colin and Violent have the sign and the seal of the Spirit upon them as blessed and beloved children of God, and we just promised not to let them forget it.

Belief leads to action; it means we love the world, too. And love invariably means sacrifice. Not necessarily in an archetypal, Jesus – Anna –Harry -- Frodo kind of way. But in small ways, every day. Love means compromise. It sometimes means discomfort, or exhaustion. Risk big and small. Sometimes it means sacrificing what we want for the greater good, for the love of others.

I started with fictional examples of sacrificial love. But there are examples all around us of people who risk their lives for love of others. Viola Liuzzo. Oscar Romero. Or people who give their lives for love of others. The single mother hustling from work to daycare to get dinner on the table and kids into bed by a decent hour before collapsing from her own exhaustion. The adult child caring for their aging parent, or the teacher who shows up at school at the crack of dawn and stays long past the final bell to support struggling students.

Everywhere we look, there are opportunities for us to give ourselves in love to God’s work of transformation. In our own community, a student at Huffman High was shot and killed because her classmate brought a gun to school. Courtlin Arrington wanted to become a nurse, and now her family

grieves her death. And Michael, the boy who shot her, a football player who thought he needed a gun for protection at school, is charged with manslaughter. Time and again, studies show we are not safer with guns around; we are more likely to become victims of violence. How are we giving ourselves to the work of loving our neighbors in the aftermath of this tragedy?

Next Sunday morning at 9:30, you're invited to join a conversation led by our own Dina and Will Marble for all those struggling to make sense of the recent incidents of gun violence, especially for parents and others who work with young people, but open to all. And on Wednesday of this coming week, at 10 am, when students across the country will walk out for call for reform to our nation's gun laws, our bell will toll 18 times in solidarity – once for each of the seventeen Parkland High School students who were killed, and once for Courtlin Arrington. On March 24, Catherine and I will be in Railroad Park at the student-led March for Our Lives, and we invite you to walk with us – because we live in the city with the fifth highest murder rate in the country – for far too many people in our city, gun violence is just a part of life and it is time to change that.

Maybe guns are not your issue. Maybe you are pouring yourself out in love for another cause dear to your heart, or for your family, or your work, or supporting a friend who is sick, or in recovery. And that is okay! My prayer is that each of us finds a way to live what we believe, even when that means we must sacrifice. Because if we believe in Christ, if we believe the gospel story that love will triumph over evil, then we must embody our love as Christ did, in concrete and tangible ways: our love for family and friends, for community, and for the whole world. In so doing, God loves and heals the world through us. At least, I pray that it might be so.