

2011 Life Sunday – Lutherans For Life – [www.lutheransforlife.org](http://www.lutheransforlife.org)

Text: Matthew 4:12-25

Theme: An Eternal Embrace of Love

David Schmitt, Associate Professor, Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, MO

Central Thought: Jesus, from the very beginning of His ministry, revealed the love of God, His Father. Through words and deeds, Jesus welcomed all people into God's kingdom, and continues to extend that welcome to others through the work of His people today.

Grace to you and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

I'd like to begin by considering two pictures: one an etching and the other a painting. They are both by the same artist. They are both of the same subject. But there is a world of difference between them.

The artist is Rembrandt and the subject is the return of the prodigal son. In 1636, Rembrandt created a small etching of this scene. Then, 32 years later, He returned to the subject and painted a larger masterpiece, The Return of the Prodigal Son. When you contrast these two studies, one an etching and the other a painting, you notice a world of difference between the two.

In the etching, Rembrandt focuses upon action. The scene is filled with movement. People are descending a staircase. Some are watching their steps, one looks to the side, another looks downward, but all are rushing to join the father who has rushed out before them to lean over and embrace his son. The father, himself, is moving forward. Rembrandt catches him in mid-stride, as he rushes to reach out and grasp his son.

In the painting, however, the picture is different. Here, Rembrandt creates a sense of stillness. He focuses on presence rather than action. No one is moving. Everyone is stationary. And all of the people, whether standing or sitting, are gazing on one central thing: the father, leaning over his son; the son, leaning into his father. These two people are locked in an eternal embrace. It is as if time has stopped and one sees that moment, that eternal moment, when the father acknowledges, claims, receives, blesses...yes, loves his son.

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Rembrandt uses paint to depict for you an eternal moment—a moment of love—the father embracing his son. Rembrandt captures it and records it so that when you look at this painting you see an eternal embrace of love.

I begin with that image, because in our gospel reading, Matthew does something similar. Rembrandt uses paint and Matthew uses words but both are masters at helping us see God's eternal embrace of love. I would like to consider Matthew's depiction of that eternal embrace in our gospel reading this morning so that we might be comforted by God's love and join His embrace as He reaches out to our world today.

Consider our gospel reading. At first glance, there is much that is going on in our reading. John the Baptizer is imprisoned. He has been handed over to the authorities and arrested. There are dark powers at work seeking to crush any voice that tries to speak of the kingdom of God. When Jesus hears this, He leaves His hometown and moves to Capernaum. There, He doesn't disappear into silence. No, He enters into action. He picks up where John left off and preaches about the coming of God's kingdom. He doesn't stay in one place but wanders about the area. We find Him on the seashore, in the synagogues, speaking to people. And His words have power. He calls Simon and Andrew and immediately they drop their nets and follow Him. He calls James and John, and immediately they drop their nets and follow him. And not only does Jesus call people, but He casts out demons and heals diseases. There is a great deal of action in these very few verses from the gospel of Matthew. And yet Matthew wants to keep us from being distracted by all of the action. He wants to help us look beyond the action and see one thing that is important. Indeed, Matthew wants us to see one eternal thing.

Notice how Matthew begins this section. He begins by taking us into the Scriptures, to hear a prophecy from the book of Isaiah. What Jesus is doing is certainly new and exciting. It causes fishermen to drop their nets and follow. It causes strangers to drop whatever they are

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doing and come. They gather their sick and their paralyzed. They travel great distances, carrying these people, and come before Jesus. What Jesus is doing causes all of this to happen, but Matthew, like Rembrandt, wants us to stop and see something deeper and more beautiful going on. In the midst of all of this newness, Matthew wants us to stop and see something old. Matthew wants us to see God's eternal plan.

Matthew remembers a prophecy from Isaiah: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned" (v15-16). This place where Jesus begins His ministry is not the center of power and influence in the world. Jesus is not starting in the largest or most powerful city of the Roman Empire. He is not seeking audience before the emperor Tiberius. No, Jesus is coming into what some would consider a backwater territory, a land that could easily be neglected, overlooked, forgotten. Jesus begins His ministry in what some politicians in America would call a "fly over state."

Yet, Matthew wants us to know that this land of darkness and obscurity has not been dark or obscure to God. No, God has seen this place for centuries. God has known these people before time itself began. From eternity, God has chosen to visit these people and bring salvation in their midst. They were part of God's eternal plan. All the way back in the time of Isaiah, God had already seen these people. His hands then knit them together in the womb. His power brought them forth by birth into the world. And now, His arms were coming to reach out and hold them in Jesus. And this was just the beginning. Ultimately, Jesus would offer them an eternal embrace. He would become their Savior. His work in this world would lead to His death on the cross. There, He would offer His sinless life as a perfect sacrifice for all sin. He would then rise to let all people know that He had conquered sin and death and that nothing would ever separate you from

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the eternal love of God. Jesus came for Peter and Andrew, James and John, Gentiles and Jews, indeed all people, including you and me and He promises to hold us in the eternal embrace of the Father's forgiving love.

So Jesus cries out, "Repent. Turn away from your sin. The kingdom of God is at hand." God has brought you into His kingdom, He claims you as His own, and promises to hold you in an eternal embrace of love.

This is what Matthew wants us to see: God's eternal love. God is in love. Not because of who you are, but because of who He is. The Lord, our God, is love. Out of love, He called you, before you were born. Out of love, He called to you, when you wandered astray. And out of love, He came for you, going into the dark corners of the world where you had hidden in sin and called you out into the light. Yes, in the light you can see your sin and that there is nothing you have done to deserve salvation but in the light you can also see your Savior and everything He has done to forgive you your sin. This Jesus, our Savior, has extended His arms on the cross in an eternal embrace.

Rembrandt used paint and Matthew used words to open our eyes to the eternal embrace of God's love. Today, God our Heavenly Father is now using you. Not only have you been brought into God's kingdom, but God now uses you to extend His arms into the world with an eternal embrace.

Just as there were obscure places in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' ministry, so too there are obscure places in our country today. I'm not talking about "fly over states." Rather, I'm talking about those who live at the very beginning and the very end of life in this world. The unborn and the elderly. These are the ones who are living in "dying states." They cannot speak for themselves. Someone has to speak for them and those who do talk often talk about their death. These people, who are carried in the darkness of the womb or cared for in nursing homes and

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hospice, are not at the center of power and influence. They do not shine in the light of celebrity news. Rather, they live in the shadows. But they live. And that's what's important to God. His hands have knit them together in the womb and His arms now reach out to them, through you, in this world. Though they are often beyond the sight of daily life, they are not beyond the sight of God and the reach of God.

In your worship folder, you will find an insert about Lutherans for Life. It is there as part of our celebration of Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. That insert gives you one small glimpse into a world of action on behalf of those who are unable to speak for themselves. You can visit the website, speak to people who are involved in their ministry, or open your eyes to other ministries and people who are bringing God's eternal embrace to the weak ones in our world. You will find that there is much that is being done—prayers and Bible studies, small group projects and personal conversations—there are many activities and it would easy to get lost in all of the work that one could do.

But today, I'd like you to focus on one simple thing: God's eternal embrace of love. That is the most important thing in the midst of all of this action. That is the cause for all of this action. Regardless of whether you are praying in your home, participating in a vigil, offering financial support, or writing to the legislature, the one most important thing that is happening is that God is continuing to come and reach out His hands to bring people, all people, even those who cannot speak for themselves, into His eternal embrace of love.

In closing, I'd like you to look at one more painting. This one is not by Rembrandt and it is not of the prodigal son. Instead it is by another artist and it seeks to capture one moment for our consideration. A crowd has gathered. There is a swirl of activity as people are bringing their children to one man who is seated, in stillness, holding a child on His lap. That man is Jesus and that child is one among many, one among millions of people that Jesus has come to hold in an

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eternal embrace. Today in prayer, we will join our voices to remember and pray for this action of God. This week, as you enter the world, I would encourage you to join your hands and heart to God's working. In Christ, God has brought you into the kingdom of Heaven. He has joined you to Jesus. Now, He sends you into the world, to extend His eternal embrace of love to those who otherwise would not be seen or heard, but forgotten.

It is God's hands that knit them and His arms that hold them and it is God's desire that all receive His eternal embrace of love. Amen.