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RICHARD W. PRIGGIE

## John 3:16-17

*For God so loved Israel, God's chosen people ... well ... no.*  
*For God so loved the Church, the bride of Christ ... but that's*  
not how it reads.

*For God so loved the world ... the word in Greek is "cosmos"...*  
For God so loved the whole cosmos, the universe—discovered  
and not yet discovered.... For God so loved the world that he gave  
his only Son.

It turns out that God was into globalism long before we were!

We are singing some evocative images in the two hymns  
we have sung thus far at this conference. Last evening we sang  
that "the peace of the Lord kept within cannot live." (*ELW*  
#646) God's peace withers and dies when confined to a single  
individual or nation. It wants out into the world, as an animal  
wants outdoors.

This morning we have sung of the big-heartedness of God.  
God's heart is so big, we sang, that it contains all of God's vast  
domain. And then the hymn becomes a prayer, "O Christ, create  
new hearts in us that beat in time with yours ... that, joined by  
faith with your great heart, become love's open doors." (*ELW*  
#722) Imagine! To have a heart as big as God's heart, a heart that  
beats in time with the life and the love of Jesus.

In the early 1960s Anglican pastor and theologian J.B.  
Philipps wrote a book the title of which judges our hearts when  
left to their own devices. *Your God Is Too Small* (Macmillan:  
New York, 1961) is the title of his book, as telling an indictment  
today as in 1961. Too small our concept of God. Too tribal. Too  
personal. Too pinched.

Matthew Fox, by contrast, head of The Institute for  
Creation Spirituality, preaches what he calls "deep ecumenism."

Ecumenism, says Matthew Fox, is well and good—to draw closer  
in understanding and relationship to the whole Christian family.  
Interfaith relations are the next step and are urgent in a world  
that is increasingly polarized over religion. And then beyond  
religion, to feel for all human beings, asserting their value simply  
because they are human, is a heart-enlarging instinct.

But Saint John did not say, For God so loved *Christians ...*  
nor did he say, For God so loved *all religious people ...* nor even *all*  
*people*. Instead, the word is "cosmos." For God so loved the cosmos  
that he gave his Son, and deep ecumenism is our response to that  
cosmic love of God; it is our embrace of and care for all created  
things, simply because all things have been created by God. Visit  
the website, <[www.thecosmicmass.org](http://www.thecosmicmass.org)>, and you can see how this  
plays itself out in worship. The Cosmic Mass draws upon visual  
art and music and nature and the breadth of sacred scripture and  
tradition. It begins in grieving and ends in dancing. It is different.  
It is long. There is nothing small, or tribal, or pinched, about it.

So how about at our colleges, instead of an Office of  
International Studies, we start an Office of Cosmic Relations...  
or perhaps that's another name for Campus Ministries! How  
about changing the title, "Ecumenical Officer"—we have  
one at churchwide and in most synods. Let's change the title  
to "Advocate for Deep Ecumenism"—people would really  
wonder what that means! And I hear there is an addendum to  
*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* coming out—Setting #11, The  
Cosmic Mass (just kidding). All of this an attempted answer  
to our prayer this morning ... remember? "O Christ, create new  
hearts in us that beat in time with yours, that, joined by faith  
with your great heart, become love's open doors."

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RICHARD W. PRIGGIE is Chaplain at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. This sermon was preached at the Vocation of the Lutheran College conference in August 2007.

One of my all-time favorite movies is almost ten years old now. Called *Pleasantville*, the movie transports Jennifer and David, two millennial teenagers, back into a fictitious 1950s community, aptly named Pleasantville, the world of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, the world of *Your God Is Too Small*. In the movie the first high school class that Jennifer visits in her new hometown is geography, where the students are studying the differences between Main Street and Elm Street in Pleasantville. Profoundly bored, Jennifer raises her hand and asks, “Excuse me, but is there anything beyond Pleasantville?” At which point all the other students turn around and stare open-mouthed at Jennifer, as if she had just uttered an obscenity.

I want to claim that question as part of our vocation as Lutheran colleges. We exist here in Rock Island to encourage our students to ask, “Excuse me, but is there anything beyond Rock Island? ... anything beyond Lutheran, beyond Christian, beyond religion, beyond human?”

After geography class in the movie, outside the school, Jennifer presses one other student she decides to trust. “Come on,” she says, “What’s outside Pleasantville? Tell me.” And he says, “There *are* places where the roads don’t go in a circle. They just keep going.”

Now, we have colleges on Main Street and congregations on Elm, and they are fine communities on well-traveled roads. But as far as the life of the mind goes, or the life of the spirit, I want to find the places where the roads don’t go in a circle, they just keep going. It’s uncharted territory, to be sure.... Imagine! to come to Rock Island in order to leave Rock Island! to be Christian in order to be more than Christian! But there is a world out there—yes, there is—a world that God loves.

We come to the table now to feed on God’s love, to take God’s love into our hearts, so that, by God’s grace, our hearts may beat in time with God’s and we come to love even the whole cosmos in the name of Christ. Amen.