

Again & Again: God Loves First

Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 3:14-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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March 14, 2021

It is one of those Bible verses that most of us memorized when we were children. Here it is again, John 3:16, recited in the King James Version as God, no doubt, intended.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Protestant Reformer Martin Luther called this verse "the gospel in miniature". For many Christians, John 3:16 does indeed act as a sort of summary of the entire gospel message in a nutshell. It functions as a theological reflection upon the reason for Christ coming into the world. Yet, there are some very important things to recognize when interpreting this passage, because **it has often been used, unfortunately, as a message of exclusive bad news for some, instead of inclusive good news for all.**

First and foremost, **it is about God's action, not ours.** It is primarily about God's grace – God's free gift of love, including our redemption. By loving the world, loving us, loving you, God sent us One who would reveal how much God loves us. That, in brief, is a major part of the Jesus story. **It is in and through the recognition and acknowledgement of that love that has the power to transform lives – your life, my life, the life of the world.** For some, the recognition of God's love may occur in an instant, in what might be described as a conversion experience. For others, it may be in knowing that there was never a time in their life when they weren't loved by God. As one biblical commentator explains:

Belief in Jesus changes one's life so that one can, indeed, speak of being 'born again,' not because of an intrinsic change in human nature, but because of the new beginning that comes with a recognition of the full character of God that is revealed in Jesus.

That's something even progressive Christians, like many of us, can affirm. The nature and character of God, as revealed as never before in and by Jesus, is a God whose inclusion and love knows no bounds. This is what frees us to live life fully and abundantly. And it reminds us that **the imagery of eternal life is as much or more about the 'here' as it is about the 'hereafter'.** To put that another way. In its biblical context, 'eternal life' does not simply mean the endless duration of human existence. Rather, it is a way of describing **life as lived in the unending Sacred Presence of God.** To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God - and that begins now, and each and every day. **Salvation, when understood this way, is not an intellectual, or even emotional acceptance of doctrinal statements that theologians (including the gospel**

writers) believed about God and Jesus. For we are told in verse 17 that God sent the One named Jesus not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. Notice that it is the *world* that God so loved. As biblical commentator William Barclay wrote over sixty years ago:

It was not a nation [or a certain people]; it was not only the good people; it was not only the people who loved God; it was the world.

The unlovable and the unlovely, the lonely who have no one else to love them, the person who loves God and the person who never thinks of God, the person who finds rest in the love of God and the person who turns away from the love of God - all are included in this vast inclusive love, the love of God.

If you don't remember anything else, remember this, **God does not pick and choose who to love (like we do). Everyone is loved, and loved equally and unconditionally!** So, how can and should living into this truth make a difference in our relationships with others, especially with those with whom we so vehemently disagree in this age of acute polarization? And even though we often say that God loves each of us, sometimes I think we still have trouble accepting that in the very depths of our being – that we are personally called beloved by God. Despite what we have done, despite our attitudes and beliefs, God includes us, God reaches out to us – to you.

In this biblical story, then, the message that cries out the loudest is one of acceptance: God's acceptance of us. Recognizing this message of God's acceptance lies at the heart of second bullet point of our congregation's Mission Statement: "Receive and openly share the love of God." It is written that way for an important reason. We often talk about sharing the love of God with others. But perhaps that's not the first step. For how can we effectively love others until we first understand that we, you and I, are already the recipients of God's love. As found in 1 John 4:19, **"We love because God first loved us."**

There are many people in our society today, perhaps even ourselves at times, for which self-acceptance may be one of life's greatest struggles. At the heart of the gospel, however, is God's acceptance of us. Since this is the result of the free gift of God's grace given to us, it is not something that we can achieve, or earn, or manufacture - we can only receive it, accept it, believe it, and live into it. **How we choose to live our lives, then, is our response to that love, acceptance, and inclusion.** The gospel writer's point in this story is that God's acceptance of us should and must have an impact on how we view ourselves, how we act, how we relate to God and each other, and how we view and treat the world and all of creation. Our world, our very selves, *cannot* remain the same when we realize that we are loved, as the hymnwriter states, with a "love that will not let us go".

To use a favorite metaphor of the author of the Gospel of John, **our life and faith is a journey into the light, into the ways of God.** Verses 20-21 state, "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." Now, when the Scripture continues, **"Those who do not believe are condemned already," it does not mean they are going to hell, as this verse continues to be interpreted by those obsessed with who's in and who's out.**

Instead, it means that living a life away from the light, marked by evil deeds, is already a condemned way to live life.

Note that the author of the gospel of John seems reluctant to speak directly of God condemning people to eternal damnation. If anything, he is veering away from an understanding of God as wanting to punish people forever, moving instead toward a view of God who wants abundant life for all people, and for all creation, for that matter. **Living in the light means that we admit the truth about ourselves.** It means recognizing and acknowledging those places and things in our own lives that need to be brought into the light. It also means, when necessary, asking for forgiveness and changing our course of action, the very definition of the concept of repentance - a really big theme during this season of Lent.

Now, for those of you who remember Cliff Notes, the Wikipedia of my generation for book summaries, this is my Cliff Notes summary of today's Gospel reading. To do real justice to this passage, a deep study of it in its context in the Gospel of John is required. This passage, for instance, is found within the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus, the religious leader who came to Jesus at night and was confused by what it meant to be "born again," or "born from above, or "born anew." But that exploration would more than double the length of this sermon. And, for the really curious, I invite you to explore the meaning behind John 3:14 which states, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." What's that supposed to mean? Here's a hint, it's an allusion to an Old Testament story in Numbers 21:4-9. The gospel writer of John makes some deep theological points with that connection. Be we just don't have time for that.

This makes me long for the days when we can meet together again in person for an engaging discussion and deeper exploration during a church school class. So remain hopeful, get vaccinated when you can, for that may not be too terribly long from now.

In the meantime, **again and again, know that love is where God begins and ends. Therefore, again and again, may love be our refrain, our beginning and our end.**

Amen.