

LENT FOUR, YEAR B, MARCH 14, 2021

Does anyone know who Roland Stuart is? Probably not, but I bet every football game you have ever watched you have seen banners with John 3:16 emblazoned on it. Back in the 70's Roland would go to football games dressed in a tie dye shirt and a huge tie dye afro wig carrying a sign simply saying John 3:16. He was the first person to do this and over the years more people picked it up. In 2009 Tim Tebow, former college and NFL quarterback, wrote John 3:16 in black under his eyes. The next day it was reported that over 90 million people had googled that phrase to find out what it was.

In many respects this verse is the most often quoted verse in the Bible. Some people say it is "the gospel in a nutshell." Martin Luther called this verse "the gospel in miniature." But can we really reduce the gospel to one verse then to a slogan or a tag line that we would slap on a bumper sticker. It cheapens what this verse is truly about. On the other hand, we also need to recognize the magnitude that this one little verse carries?

What we have before us this morning is what I would consider one of the most misused and misunderstood texts in the entire Scripture. This one single verse has provided motivation for some of the most destructive and unchristian impulses of those who take the name Christian.

Taken literally it suggests that those who do not believe in Jesus will perish. And John 3:16 has become the cornerstone for a structure of beliefs that include rejection of those who differ from us in ideology, gender, race, culture, religion and a host of other ways. It is almost impossible to grasp the enormity of the harm, hurt and abuse that has been encouraged by this literal rendering of John's Gospel that those who don't believe like I do are condemned. My religion or brand of Christianity is better than yours. And if you don't believe you will perish by my sword, if necessary.

So, to combat this, I suggest we look at the verse in two parts. The first section says God so loved the world that he gave his only son. This is a proclamation of divine love and it's all about grace. God loves the whole world, not just the baptized or the righteous or progressives or conservatives or even Christians; the whole world. This phrase indicates a very inclusive God not an exclusive one. God loves all of us no matter who or what we are and God sent his son to live among us to teach us about God's all-encompassing love. This is God's self-sacrificing love for us that we struggle to understand.

There's an ancient Bedouin story that I think illustrates this kind of love. There were some Bedouin tribes and a young man struck and killed his best friend. He knew, by their ancient laws, the consequences of his actions meant he would be sought out and killed. So, he ran to the neighboring tribe and asked the chief for sanctuary. The chief, honoring the tradition of hospitality, took him in and promised to protect him till the matter could be resolved legally. The next day the other tribesman arrived at the chief's tent and asked for the young man so they could execute him. The chief firmly told them he

promised the young man he would keep him safe. The other men said, "But you have no idea who he killed!" The chief again said, I have given him my word he will be safe and I will not turn him over to you. Finally, one of the men blurted out, 'He killed your son.'" The chief was stunned and deeply shaken. He was rendered speechless for a long time. Then finally, he called the young man to come out from his tent and put his hand on the shoulder of the young man and said, "then he is now my son and everything I have will one day be given to him."

This is exactly what God does. God gives us his son and even when we crucify him God turns around and makes us God's children. This is divine love. It is agape love – love freely given without cost or without deserving it. When you love that deeply, you don't say "choose me or die." That's not love. When you love that deeply and expansively, what you want is not condemnation but for more than anything for everyone to accept that love, to trust in that love, to lean back in that love, to rejoice in that love, to let that love take root in our hearts and transform us into deep, courageous lovers of the entire cosmos themselves. That's what this verse is about.

Now the second part says, everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. The word that has been translated as believe really should be translated as trust. It's not about a belief in certain dogmas rather a deep and total trust commitment to relationships. This is about trusting the bonds of love that are stronger than fear and having a deep trust in a relationship with God and with each other.

Second, it's not about heaven and hell or about life forever The word translated here as "eternal" doesn't mean going on and on for ever and ever. The Greek word really means "unbound." It's about a quality of life beyond space and time. It's about a way of being emancipated into abundance and richness. That's what God is offering us. Life liberated. Life of infinite breadth and depth, of healing and joy. Not somewhere, someday, but right here, right now.

There is definitely a tension between these two parts of this verse. But perhaps it gets cleared up in the next verse which says "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Here again the word translated as saved doesn't mean the opposite of lost. Rather it means to heal, to keep safe, to make whole. Contrary to the way God is sometimes portrayed, condemnation is not God's line of work and Jesus did not come into the world to condemn it.

Rather than creating a belief system that people believe saves some and rejects others, John is simply expressing the depth of God's love, which can be encountered in the presence of Jesus. The dream of God is limitless life, love and healing in community. This dream is found in the person of Jesus who calls us to love without judgment, do justice courageously, embrace life joyfully, reverently and invite all faiths and people into relationship for the healing and transformation of ourselves, our community and the world.

So the truth of this verse resides in the fact that God relates to us through love. Pure love. And we can choose to refuse God's love. We can choose to reject God's gift.

And even when we refuse, God still loves us. That's the part that we don't get. That's the part that not only drives us crazy, it infuriates us. But that's what unconditional love is all about.

As Christians, we are called to be a part of God's work in the world. It is a work not of condemning, but of healing. Not of judging, but of loving. We are to show through love, not judgment, what God is really like. And it takes a lot of hard work.

What John was telling his small community of believers is that being a Christian does not give us a license to condemn, but it does give us a reason and a responsibility to love. It means that all we do is done in a spirit of love. It means that we respect each person, even those with whom we disagree. It means we understand that sharing God's love is the work of every Christian.

And so the good news for us, is that God's purpose is pure grace and forgiveness. God's motive is love. God so loved the world that God gave his only son that all that trust will find limitless life, healing and love. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be healed, and be made whole. Thanks be to God. Amen.