

## For God So Loved...

**1John 4:9-10, 16-17    John 3:16-17**

How many of you, whether as a child or as an adult, have memorized John 3:16? I wonder what associations you have with this passage? Do you hear it as good news? Was it presented to you that way? Maybe we think of the guy at football games in the end zone who stands with a rainbow wig waving a John 3:16 sign? (image) Whatever your association with this passage, let's try to hear it anew:

*16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

This is the word of the Lord!

What did you hear? Did you hear good news?

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—priest and paleontologist/scientist, who chose to serve as a stretcher-bearer instead of a chaplain in WW1: *"The day will come when, after harnessing space, winds, the tide and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire."* May it be so!

Let's talk about love. I'd like us to reflect on John 3:16 this morning, as we prepare for Christmas eve and Christmas day. So simple, yet so profound. It's been called the gospel in a nutshell.

I realize I'm plucking this out of the narrative context in John 3, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a well-trained religious leader of the Pharisee sect (strict adherents to the letter of the Jewish law), who, in order not to be seen by his fellow Pharisees, comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness at night to have a conversation. Most of their conversation is about what it means to be born again, or born from above, and the conversation then results in this amazing statement by Jesus about God's love for the world.

John 3:16. It's so simple. And so important. Yet the true meaning of it so easily forgotten. God so loved the world that he gave Jesus. And God loves the world still. As I often like to do, let's look at what Jesus did *not* say. Jesus did not say:

*"God was so mad at the world he gave his only son..."* God is not mad at the world! If that's what someone believes (that God is angry at people, or the world), then that says more about the person who says it than about God. God

isn't mad at the world. God isn't mad at you. God loves you, and God loves the world, more than you can comprehend.

Jesus also didn't say *"God was so disappointed in the world, he gave his son..."* Heavy sigh... "There they go again. Once more, they've failed me. Jesus, go... straighten them out..." God is not disappointed in the world. God is not disappointed with you. God loves you, and the world, more than you can know.

Jesus didn't say *"God was so at the end of his rope and wringing his hands about the world didn't know what else to do, so as a last resort he sent Jesus..."* "What am I going to do with these people?!?!? Well, because I have no other options, I guess I'll have to send Jesus..."

No! God so **loved** the world that he gave Jesus. Whitworth professor Dale Bruner puts it this way: "God loved the world so much (that's the "so" here—*so much*) that he gave Jesus, the very best he could give." And on Christmas week, this is what we celebrate, as we affirm that Jesus—God in the flesh—comes into the world, and into our lives.

And I wonder: how would Nicodemus have heard this? Like a lot of narratives in *John's* gospel, this is a private moment; a personal conversation with

Jesus. What did Nicodemus hear? *“For God so loved the world? Are you kidding me?!?”* No, God is ready to *judge* the world—the evildoers, the pagan oppressor Romans. That’s what the messiah has come to do. That’s what people like Nicodemus, and the Pharisees, expected.

You can even hear this in the preaching of John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. Listen to this from both Matthew 3 and Luke 3; they are worded the same in both. John says to the people:

*“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?! Bear fruit worthy of repentance! Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire... I baptize you with water for repentance, but **one who is more powerful than I** is coming after me; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire; and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

What is John the Baptizer expecting? *For God so loved the world?* Sounds to me like he’s expecting judgment! Bring it on! He wants the Messiah to bring the heat. Literally. The fire he’s talking about here is not spiritual zeal, or fire to warm your heart. He’s talking about the fire of judgment.

John the Baptizer *recognized*, rightly, that Jesus was the messiah who was promised. But John didn’t *understand*, rightly, the full reason Jesus came—at least not at first. His expectations were quite different, and reflected the beliefs

of some of the more fundamentalist Jewish sects of the day. We find out later in the gospels that Jesus' proclamation of good news, and his ministry of healing, and his hanging out with the riff raff and marginal people—which reflected God's heart of *love* for the world, *and not judgment*—was as much of a surprise to John as it probably was to Nicodemus. Later on, we read in the gospels, when John is in prison, he sends his people to ask Jesus: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we wait for someone else?” John is disappointed, and confused. Jesus' ways were a surprise to John. As they were a big surprise to most people at that time.

And I would venture to say, that just as people heard “God so loved the world” as a surprise in the 1<sup>st</sup> century culture, people in our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture would hear this as a surprise all the same. And that may surprise us! It is assumed that our culture has heard it and has an idea of what it means. After all, rainbow hair guy has been holding up a John 3:16 sign at sports events for years! But people don't know what it means. They really don't.

If you pulled a Jay Leno and did some jay-walking and interviewed people on the street about the reason they think Jesus came, you'd get comments about judgment, or rule keeping, or that Jesus was a good person, a great moral

teacher, or a social revolutionary. You'd get a lot of those reasons, but you would not hear someone say,

Therefore, the call to Christ's church is to embody, to incarnate if you will, for the sake of the world, the true meaning of this simple, simple word from Jesus—that God loves the world. Jesus embodied it during his earthly ministry, and now it's our turn to embody it. We are the physical presence of Jesus Christ on earth, as his church. Jesus came to earth, bodily; "became flesh and moved into the neighborhood" as the Message translation playfully puts it. That's the good news; God came near in Jesus, physically, to be close to humanity. And once Jesus ascended to heaven after he was raised from death, it became the church's responsibility, *our* responsibility—and our privilege—to be the body, the physical body, of Christ on earth; to represent his heart of love for the world. As we heard the apostle John in his letter, "In this world we are like Jesus." That's a profound statement. In this world we are like Jesus.

God so loved the world. What do we learn about love from this short verse? Using Jesus' very words from John 3:16 we learn that God's love is:

1. Sacrificial and valuable: For God so loved the world that he ***gave his one and only...*** That he gave his one and only. The word here is "gave" and it's

the past tense form of the verb “to give” (duh), but when this word appears as a noun, it is the word “gift.” So in a way we could translate this as “God so loved the world that he gave the best and only gift he could give.” God’s love is sacrificial, and valuable. He **gave** Jesus.

It’s the same word used during holy week, when it talks about Jesus being handed over, or, literally, **given**, to be crucified. It’s the same word that Jesus uses during the Lord’s supper: “this is my body, **given** for you.” Not ‘*broken* for you’—Jesus never said that; he only says ‘given for you.’ He does *break* the bread, but that broken bread is his body “given.” So, God’s love is sacrificial and valuable. In giving us Jesus, God gave everything.

Because he not only gave, “...he gave his **one and only...**” It’s not like God had many children and plucked one of them out to come down and live in our messiness here on earth. God gave his *one and only*.

God’s love is sacrificial, and it’s valuable.

2. God’s love is personal: “God gave his one and only **son.**” God didn’t give his one and only philosophy. He didn’t give his one and only better set of rules to follow. His one and only guide to self-help and a better life. God’s love is not some abstract concept, or a philosophy that we are supposed to

grasp. It's not a new set of rules to follow, or 10 easy steps for self-improvement. This is Emmanuel, God with you, and with the world, in the form a *person* named Jesus the Christ. God's love is personal.

3. God's love is accessible: "***that whoever believes in him...***" That whoever believes in him. Love isn't something we earn, or work hard to get. We don't jump through hoops or measure up, or pass a test. It only requires simple child-like trust, and the act of believing, of trusting. God's love is accessible.

4. God's love is wide, and far reaching: "for God so loved... ***the world.***" The great news about God's love is that it's not limited to a select few, or only the well behaved, or to people born with the right color skin, or on a certain continent. It's not for the best influencers, or for people with the right education. It's for the world. God's love is expansive and far reaching.

And God's love is everywhere. It's not in some places and not others. If the incarnation (God becoming human in Jesus Christ)... if the incarnation teaches us anything, it's that God—and therefore God's love, because God is love—can be found everywhere: in a cattle trough in a barn, in an executive's office, among the homeless, with the sick, on a donkey (think Palm Sunday), in a fishing boat, God's

love can be found in places of power, and in places of poverty; where God's name is known, and where it is not known; with our friends, and with our enemies; in our convictions and in our doubts; in life, and in death; at church and on the street, in every classroom and board room and hospital room from Edmonds to the ends of the earth. God is with us, and with everyone, every day. Many people just don't know it yet. And God wants them to know it.

God's charge to us, his beloved, is to embody this love as much as we are able, as we go from here today, and every day. Celebrate Christ's birth and God's coming near to you in Jesus Christ, and then live like you believe John 3:16 for yourself and for the world: live in a way that's sacrificial and offers what is valuable; live in a way that's personal—offering ourselves. Live in a way that makes Jesus accessible (which may require making ourselves accessible), not putting any hoops or hurdles in the way of people simply coming to know Jesus. And live in a way that recognizes the value and worth of *every* person; not just our favorite people, but every person—in your world and in THE world.

God so loved the world that he gave Jesus. And go so loves the world still that now gives Steve, Mary, John, Margaret, Hallack... you fill in the blank. We won't

do it perfectly, but with God's help, and our willingness, people can come to know that God is love, and that God loves them and is with them.

Love Has Come