

“For God So Loved” – John 3:14-21 – March 14, 2021

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John 3:16. It is perhaps one of the most recognizable passages of scripture and perhaps, too, the one most often memorized by kids in Sunday schools around the world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” It has become so recognizable as to almost become cliché. Making it hard to understand and even harder to preach. In my nearly 16 years of writing and preaching sermons, I don’t think I have ever actually attempted to preach a sermon on John 3:16. It has always been a daunting endeavor. And anytime it came up in the three year lectionary cycle, there were always other options.

So I have been wrestling with this passage for the last week or so. How to best get to the heart of this particular passage that we all know and think we understand. It seems simple, deceptively so. Simple, yet powerful.

For God so loved the world.

This statement and its commentary come as a result of Jesus talking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus could see that Jesus spoke with authority and wanted a deeper understanding of him and his message. In their conversation Jesus spoke of being born from above, a concept that Nicodemus could not fathom. He was trying to understand it literally, but Jesus was referring to a spiritually reality. Those who actively follow Jesus, which in John’s gospel is what it means to believe – those who actively follow Jesus will come to see God’s love as it truly is. And all this is an act of God’s Spirit.

Are you starting to see the complexity in trying to unpack this conversation?

But if we focus on just the one verse – for God so loved the world – we learn that the bottom line is this – God is motivated to act by love. As we look at the ongoing story of God’s relationship with humanity, God’s love for us is always present. Love is the foundational reality.

One of the first things we Presbyterians like to talk about when it comes to describing what we believe about God is grace. God deals with humankind gracefully. And we believe that that grace is a direct outpouring of God’s love. Here’s how it works – Human beings mess up. We get things wrong. We hurt one another. We hurt ourselves. And we put ourselves first. And God still loves us. God has always loved us.

If we look at the story about the very first humans, living in paradise. Brand new world, God was pleased. The newly created humans were given Garden full of everything they would ever need to live and thrive. Everything was good. The critters were all herbivores. As it is described in the Genesis story, life was perfect. There was just one rule. And they broke it. The punishment? If you’re gonna disobey the one rule and put yourselves first, before God, then you get kicked out of Eden. But that’s not the end of the story. God still loves us. The fall from innocence results in having to work for survival, but God has provided everything we need and patiently waits for us to come home.

The bible is an ongoing saga of God’s pursuit of humanity. God loves us. God wants the best for us. God has always provided the means for us to come back into a loving relationship with God. In the

time when human beings were still chasing each other around with pointy, sharp sticks and making bricks from scratch, God saved the Hebrew people, freed them from their enslaving captors, and led them to a place where they could live and thrive. God even provided a set of rules on a couple of stone tablets that spelled out for them the way to pursue loving relationships with God and one another. They didn't follow the rules. They didn't love God. They didn't love one another.

Later on, for God so loved the world, God sent prophets to speak to the people with one basic message – get your act together! Quit ignoring God, stop treating each other horribly, take care of the people who are unable to take care of themselves. And why can't they take care of themselves? Because you're not following the rules. Multiple prophets came at different times to speak to the people. Some brought dire warnings, others brought words of hope in the midst of tragedy, they all implored the people to come back to God. And oftentimes that worked – people stopped being so selfish, turned back to God, and took care of one another. For a while anyway.

But then came Jesus. Gospel writer John is eloquent and poetic as he attempts to describe a mystery. Numerous theologians for the past 2000 odd years have tried to make sense out of the doctrine of the Incarnation – how God took on human flesh to live among us. It defies all rational understanding. But what John does get across to us in his gospel is the sheer immensity of God's love for humanity. That in Jesus Christ we have seen the very love of God in action. And in him is the light of God, that exposes every weakness, every moral failing, every act of defiance – everything in opposition to what John calls eternal life – life in which we live completely and fully in God's all-embracing love and allow that love to flow through us to reach others – in Christ we have the possibility of living eternal life in the present moment.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus modeled God's love in his actions and his words. In him we find the template for a life lived in complete obedience to God's will. His love for God was completely interwoven with his love for others. As we learn from his example, we come to realize our limitations. Our humanness pulls us to live in the center of our own existence, giving little thought to anything outside of our tiny bubble. But Christ calls us to come out of our narrow reality – enveloping us in the light of God's love – as we are drawn deeper into that love our capacity to love others grows proportionally. The more we receive God's love, the more we are able to share that love. When we draw back from God's love, when we pull away from the light into our natural tendencies to prioritize ourselves and our own desires, our capacity to love others is diminished.

The concept is so simple, yet we make it so hard. For God so loved the world.

In Jesus Christ we see the manifestation of that love. As from the beginning, God's love is ever-present. And as from the beginning, God pursues us, longing to share that love with us, patiently waiting for us to accept it and share it with others.