

## *Again and Again, God Loves First*

I went to Hamilton elementary school in Berkley, Michigan from 1965-1971. During that time, there was an after school activity called “Bible Club”. Yes, there was such a thing as Bible Club in a public school. I don’t remember the teacher’s name, but I remember that I loved going to Bible Club. We learned the stories of Jesus every week using a felt board where cut outs were put on and moved around as we learned the stories of Jesus.

I earned a book on the holy land because I had perfect attendance! One of the other challenges we had was to memorize scripture. I wasn’t very good at it but I did memorize one. John 3:16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Remember that was when I didn’t know about inclusive language and seeing God as more than a male.

In retrospect I wish I’d learned more. I mean, if nothing else I could have said I memorized John 11:35, Jesus wept, but I must have missed that day!

I am convinced that even the most casual Christian knows one verse of the bible by heart; our Gospel lesson for today contains John 3:16. The football fans with the big signs who sit on the fifty yard line, consider it adequate to simply hold up their signs with one word and three numbers: John 3:16, fully confident that everyone will know what they mean.

The claim of this verse is really simple. God loves the world so much that God sent Jesus to live as one of us and if we believe in Jesus, we will have eternal life – however we have come to understand that concept.

The message is direct – God loves the world so much he sent Jesus to teach us how to live. But it also comes with some judgment because what if you don’t believe in Jesus? What if you are of a different faith? Do you have to believe in Jesus for eternal life? This statement comes with some baggage we need to unpack.

Marcus Borg, a prominent Biblical scholar says this about this most popular of all New Testament Scripture. He said that it has the potential to twist Christianity into a religion of rewards and requirements. The reward that is dangled before the Christian, like a carrot before a donkey, is this promise of eternal life – heaven,

however we choose to define it. The requirement is an acceptance of a precise set of beliefs, supplemented by prescribed behaviors that form the essence of the Christian life. Believe these things, live in this way, and you will be saved. Obviously the corollary applies...fail to believe the right things and refuse to live a holy, obedient life, and well, sorry, but we hold you like a hot climate!

The problem with a strict interpretation of John 3:16 and what follows, is that Christianity can become a kind of contract or reward structure. If we do certain things...God will compensate us in an appropriate way.

On some levels this might seem reasonable but in reality, it contradicts the heart of Scripture that tells us again and again that salvation is not something we earn or deserve, but rather a gift from God, unearned and unmerited.

I believe we are not living up to the gospel if our ultimate concern is our personal preservation. How can I make sure that I live forever? If I am not careful my total motivation in life could become...not the welfare of all people, but my personal assurance that I will belong to God forever.

If we aren't careful we can take the reading of John 3:16 and use it to divide people into the good and the bad, the "real" Christians and the non-Christians, the saved and the damned. We need to feel like we are succeeding, at the very least that we are more God pleasing or what is the point of it all.

I hope you see the problem. The goal of life should be our transformation into the image of Jesus Christ, living in a loving, caring manner. We should be concerned about the welfare of all people, all those who are our brothers and sisters, the hungry, the poor, the sick, those living at the margins of life. How sad it would be if we were more concerned about getting in to heaven, than having compassion and concern for others. That is what should motivate us! If we aren't careful, we can easily miss the moment and become those uncaring religious people in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, who passed by the needy man, as they hurried on to secure their salvation, the quest for eternal life.

The test asks us to believe in Jesus, not doctrines. I believe in...um....Barry Manilow. I have seen him live and on T.V. I have his CDs. I believe in him. In the same way I am sure that most Jews, Muslims and Buddhists can claim they

believe in Jesus, in the sense that he was a historic figure, some even identify him as a prophet and great teacher. John 3:16 does not literally say more is required than to believe in him, it does not say more than that.

John 3:16 literally does not pronounce Christians alone as saved – nor does it condemn others in the world. And the best part of this verse is that it says that God loves the whole world, not just Christians. And I will even dare to go to the next verse, John 3:17. Here is what that verse says in the NRSV version, For God sent not God's Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. The world is literally not condemned by God sending Jesus. There is no condemnation. The world "Save" in greek means to deliver, or protect, to heal, preserve or make well. Jesus is a means, a gate, an access, an opening, a portal, in the universe through which the world can be protected and made whole. Now that's my kind of salvation. Jesus is a blessing to the world, not just to Christians. We are not some exclusive club!!!!

This month is the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma March, a critical event in the struggle for black equality in this country. Events in Charlottesville and the insurrection at the capitol remind us that this struggle is not over. When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the marchers, they were mostly believing Christians. They were confronted by brutal, bigoted, law enforcement and the taunting white majority who shouted hatred at the marchers. We must remember that both the marchers and the white citizens of Alabama who opposed them were all Christians.

The marchers knew that they were nowhere near the Promised Land...they were still living under bondage..in exile...and like Moses, they shouted, Let God's people go.

They believed they were a people dwelling in deep darkness, to quote the prophet Isaiah and they were determined to move into the light.

They marched for a better life, for the right to vote, for decent wages to support their families. Many had personal relationships with Jesus but that was not enough. Those who opposed them also had accepted Jesus as their Savior. They read the same Bible but interpreted the texts in a different way. The bigots were determined to cling to the past, denying equality to those who were their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's look at our art for today. It is entitled Light Wave by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity.



She says this about her art: My first memory of this passage is from writing “John 3:16” on my basketball shoes when I was in seventh grade, joining many of my teammates in blending our sport with our faith. I don’t remember knowing what the verse really meant, but my display of it was to make a statement about who I was – or at least who I desperately wanted to be. Like the branded clothes I wore, or the way I styled my hair, this was just another way to curate my middle school self image. I wanted to show that I was good, that I fit in, that I believed in God. Later that basketball season, I added another Sharpie pen tattoo to my basketball shoes, my mother’s initials and the dates of her birth and death, marking the 44

years she lived. After her funeral, my teammates added her initials and the dates of her life to their sneakers in solidarity.

Now I know that Jesus originally spoke these famous words to Nicodemus, perhaps whispering them amidst the hushed noises of the night. I wonder why Nicodemus came to Jesus in the first place? Had Jesus' teaching uprooted his religious self-image, one carefully curated to project propriety and adherence to the law? Or had death recently left a sharp sting, unraveling his tidy beliefs, creating in him a well of desperate questions about eternal life?

Jesus speaks to him with poetry of promise. God didn't send his son to judge the world but so the world might be restored through him. For God so loved. For God so loves, that like light, God keeps traveling to reach us with that redeeming love.

In this abstract painting, the gold leaf marks become like a wave gliding through the cosmos, moving endlessly until it reaches everything.

As I think back to those Sharpie pen inscriptions on my basketball shoes, perhaps "For God so loved...so that everyone will have eternal life" was the perfect companion to my mom's initials.

For God so Loved.....everyone!

We need to let the world know that. We can go out in our community and do good. We are supposed to do that good stuff of everyday reality where salvation can come in the form of hands that help; feet that carry our neighbor's load, ears that listen, mouths that speak care and comfort; or just being present in those moments when someone is in trouble or in need.

Our belief in God's begotten one has led us as a community of faith to feed the homeless for days a week, leading them eventually to permanent supportive housing.

Our belief in God's begotten one has led us to open our sanctuary as a warming center for those who need relief from the cold.

Our belief in God's begotten one has led us to offer sanctuary to refugees and to offer a wide embrace of equality and love for those often cast off and shunned by the culture, even by other churches.

Our belief in God's begotten one has led us to do actions of protests in the streets and on our church steps.

Our belief in God's begotten one has led us to pre-development for a housing and justice center that downtown Detroit needs so desperately right now.

Our belief in God's begotten one has led us to open our doors to interfaith compassion with our relationship to the Islamic Center of America.

I've listed just a few things our belief in God's begotten Son has led us to do. We can so love the world that we give of ourselves to help save it. We can do that without considering ourselves or our path to God better than others. We can love, we can follow Jesus and believe in Christ without condemning others.

Here's the thing I am hoping we can remember. This is about seeing scripture in a new way. It's about understanding that through Jesus we really are helping to save and transform existence in the here and now by doing our part as followers and believers in God's begotten one to help make the whole world better.

For God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus so that we might do just that; be love in the world. And through Christ we are called to take action to save the world and we are doing that right in our own community. And God didn't make it an exclusive club just for Christians!

God works through Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus too! God loves them just as much as God loves us! And yes, I preached this in another church I served and was called a heretic!

God so loved the world!!! God loves the world! And we are called to share that love with everyone regardless of their beliefs or lack of beliefs. May we be God's hands and feet today and everyday! Amen.