

“Taking the Verse in Context”
John 3:14-21
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In the mid-1990’s when we were in Richmond, Virginia, I did a television interview that solidified my perspective on interactions with the media. I have had some good experiences, for example, my recent interviews with television and newsprint about Billy Graham. But I have also had some unpleasant experiences, and the bottom line is that you never know how what you say will be used. Even video footage can be adapted. So, my basic perspective is to be careful and anxious.

This particular interview was about churches in transitional communities. I served a church in a community undergoing great transition and I had done a great deal of research on the subject. So, I was interviewed by the ABC affiliate doing this story.

I said the old thinking was that there were only three options for churches in communities with significant transition – change so as to become more congruent with the changing community, move to where most of your congregants are or die. Change, move or die – those were the options. But I went on to say there was some new thinking that developing a certain niche or addressing a certain need could enable a church to draw from a larger community. The options are not as limited as we used to think, I said, but decisive action is required.

I did the story, felt good about what I said, and then turned on the news at 11. When they played the story, the reporter said a bit about the subject and then introduced me, noting, “Dr. Chapman says...” and they cut to me saying, “There are only three options – change, move or die.” And that was it. Well, it was me on the camera, I said that, but taking that sentence out of context gave it an entirely different meaning!

So it goes with media interviews and many other things in life. We can choose our words as carefully as possible, but we never know how they might be reframed and given another meaning. In fact, we can do this with just about any communication, even with the Bible.

How many of us have heard the phrase, “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” used as a rationale for corporal punishment? These are the words of Holy Scripture, they come from Proverbs 13:24, and lifted out of context, they serve the purpose of proving a pre-determined point. But what do they mean in context?

The text emphasizes the importance of some kind of discipline, it doesn't specify what kind, but what exactly is a rod, this thing we are not supposed to spare? It is not a bludgeoning tool, but a guide used by shepherds to keep sheep from going astray or falling off a cliff. The psalmist says, “Your rod and your staff - they comfort me (23:4).”

There are many arguments for and against corporal punishment, some more informed than others, but to say that the Bible at this point clearly argues for it is to distort the meaning of the text.

We face a similar risk with the beloved text we have read today. Most of us know the words of John 3:16 by heart. I wonder how many times this text has been proclaimed from this pulpit over the course of our 206-year history? As I have said in the About Our Worship for this service, it seems appropriate that we worship around this text today, given how central it is to Christian experience, this concise statement about God's love for the world expressed in Christ. And this basic message of God's love is clear no matter what frame we put around it.

But how we understand this love, how we define terms like “belief” and “eternal life” and how we view the fate of those who do not view things the way we think they should are all matters that vary mightily depending on how much context we take into account. If we come to the verse with our pre-determined positions, it will say what we want it to and prove our point. If, however, we take the verse in context, and here I mean the context of this passage and chapter, indeed the Gospel According to John as a whole and the entirety of the Christian Testament, we come away with a very different perspective

The most common view of John 3:16 is that it tells us what we need to do to get right with God. It all begins with God's love for the world, but how do we embrace this love? We believe in Jesus, and as a result, we have eternal life.

Now, belief, according to the most common view, involves giving assent to certain claims about Jesus – that he is God’s Son, that he is our Savior, that he died for our sins and was raised to give us hope for eternal life. Eternal life means life everlasting, life with God, heaven.

The corollary to all of this is that those who do not believe in this sense, those who do not give assent to certain claims about Jesus, will not experience eternal life. So, our goal is to believe the right things and get others to as well so that we can all get to the right place in eternity.

Of course, not everyone does believe the “right things”. So, some won’t make it. But that is their choice.

This is what many of us were taught growing up and thus, this is what we think John 3:16 says and means. And this is part of the story, it’s just not the whole story. Taken out of context, John 3:16 can mean just this, but understood in context, it means much more!

First and foremost, God’s love for the world is bigger than this. God’s love is for the world whole and all the people in it. That is, God’s love is not just for human beings. The first covenant we have read about this Lent, the one described in Genesis 9, is made not just with Noah and his family, but with every living creature. And the part of God’s love that is directed toward people is directed toward all people.

We cannot read John 3:16 without reading John 3:17. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved by him.” God’s love is universal. Our response to that love may not be, but God’s love is. So, while we must allow for varied responses to God’s love, any interpretation of John 3:16 that takes into account the surrounding verses and the Bible as a whole focuses on who is included in God’s concern – everyone!

But it’s not just that God’s love, as expressed in Christ, includes more people than we might think; this love is also broader in scope than we often imagine. Union Theological Seminary Professor Samuel Cruz says we tend to romanticize John 3:16 and think it is just about us as individuals (www.workingpreacher.org). Jesus came to save us from sin and evil, not by addressing evil, but by sacrificing his body for us so that we might be saved from the consequences of sin, if we believe.

And again, this is part of the story. God is concerned with individual lives. On the cross, Christ addresses the consequences of sin and evil. But God is also concerned with the world as a whole, says Cruz. Throughout his life, Jesus addresses not only the consequences of evil, but evil itself. He heals people, casts out demons, confronts injustice. God's love is concerned with not just healing brokenness, but addressing the underlying causes of brokenness. God's love for the world is always bigger than we think.

A second concern lies with our understanding of the term belief. John 3:16 says that those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life, but what does it mean to believe? Is it simply giving cognitive assent to certain claims about Jesus? The surrounding verses of this passage give us a number of clues that this is not the case, as does the entire Christian Testament. Even the Devil and various demons removed from people by Jesus seem to know who Jesus is, they confess his identity. Cognitive assent may be part of the story, but it is not the whole story.

In his book *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg says there are four kinds of faith – *assensus*, assent, giving mental assent to propositions; *fiducia*, trust, radical trust in God, like floating on water in a deep ocean; *fidelitas*, fidelity, faithfulness in commitment; and *visio*, vision, seeing life in a whole new way.

Which of these kinds of faith best describes Christian faith in general and the kind of belief John is talking about? All four kinds are involved, but that latter three are most central – trust, fidelity and vision. What we believe about Jesus and what God is doing through his life, death and resurrection obviously matters immensely. But it matters so much more that we trust in him, in his teachings and way of life.

In the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – Jesus' invitation to others is, "Follow me." Not, "Believe this or that," but, "Follow me, listen to my teachings, trust in me." In John, Jesus uses an entirely different vocabulary, he speaks often of belief, but it is always belief *in* him, not belief *that*... It is always about trust, not just assent.

The immediate context gives us a clue that faith cannot be reduced to signing our name on the dotted line to a few correct beliefs. In verse

14, where we joined the story, John links Jesus' death on a cross to the bizarre story we have read from Numbers 21 wherein God sends poisonous serpents to bite and kill people because they have complained about their experience in the wilderness and then God has Moses make a bronze serpent for people to look at in order to live. It's difficult to sort out the theology of this text, but all who look upon Jesus in this way, John says, all who believe in him like this, will be saved.

But just before this verse, we have the story of Nicodemus wherein faith is a rich, complex and mysterious thing, wherein we are born again or from above. We are born of the Spirit who is like the wind. We cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. Even a lifelong student of scripture and faith like Nicodemus cannot fully grasp what Jesus is saying. And just after John 3:16, the text goes on to contrast people who love darkness and do evil deeds with people who come to the light and do what is true. So, obviously it matters how we live.

Faith surely involves embracing the kind of claims we make about Jesus, but it involves so much more – trust, loyalty, openness to the Spirit, the transformation of our very being, and ultimately living in a different way, by Jesus' teachings. All who believe in this sense will have eternal life.

But what exactly is eternal life? This is a third significant concern with how we view this text in context. What is eternal life? The most obvious answer is life everlasting, life after death, life that goes on and on, like some sermons... only better, pray God... And this is part of the story; it's just not the whole story.

Eternal life, as understood in the Christian Testament as a whole, is a whole new quality of life made possible because we live in intimate relationship with God. It endures forever, but it begins the moment we embrace God's gift of love.

Thus, to say that those who do not believe in Jesus, in the sense in which we have defined belief, do not experience eternal life, is not to say that God tortures some endlessly because they don't provide the correct answers on the final exam. It's simply to say that those who choose not to live in intimate relationship with God, following Jesus' teachings, do

not live in intimate relationship with God, following Jesus' teachings. Those who do experience eternal life, now and forevermore.

I think of the story a mentor of mine has told about a farmer talking to a young man who was interested in his daughter. "Son," he said, "Any man who marries my daughter will get a prize." "Really," said the wide-eyed young man, "What will that be?" He probably didn't even realize he had just sealed his fate.

The prize of marrying that young woman was marrying that young woman! The prize of living in intimate fellowship with a God who loves us is living in intimate fellowship with a God who loves us! That's eternal life, we need nothing more, but since God is eternal in the enduring sense, we trust that it does involve more.

So, all of this in one verse? If we read it in context, all of this and much more! No wonder the verse is so familiar and beloved.