

“Just One Verse but One Worth Our Time”

John 3:14–21

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I confess that am not into bumper sticker theology. My thoughts would wrap around the whole vehicle, several times, and I often have questions about brief statements of faith. For example, the old phrase “I Found It” isn’t clear. To what does “it” refer? Jesus is not an “it” and God finds us. I think of the scene in “Forrest Gump” where Lieutenant Dan asks Forrest, “Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?” to which he replies, “I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir.”

Brief statements of faith can be unclear. I would rather use more words and images. And you may have noticed that I prefer to preach on biblical stories rather than concise theological claims because there is more space for creative reflection in stories. But some succinct statements carry more weight than others and thus need to be explored carefully to avoid misconceptions, to understand the varied ways they are viewed, and to identify the stories to which they are connected.

John 3:16 is at the top of this list because it is ubiquitous and subject to misunderstanding. We have seen the signs at ballgames, various bumper stickers, the verse written on everything imaginable, including human bodies via tattoo. We also know there are varied takes on what it means to insiders and outsiders. In an article I read this week, one pastor confesses thinking as a young child that the John 3:16 sign held up at a football game referred to a player with an unusual number.

We know what the verse says. “For God so loved the world the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” But what does it mean, what stories inform our understanding, and what is its impact on us? I want to explore this one verse today with these questions in mind.

The verse begins with these words, “For God so *loved*...” Loved... Whatever else we glean in the way of meaning, love is at the center of this

text and the Gospel. God’s intent is to embrace the world, not condemn it. John 3:17 says the latter quite clearly. Love, not condemnation — this is the message of the Jesus story. We see this in this one verse that summarizes the Gospel, but we also see it in Jesus’ ministry — his teaching and healing; his life, death, and resurrection — God so *loves* the world that God is willing to go to any length for it.

This may seem obvious, but it is not the central teaching of many churches nor is it the way John 3:16 has often been used. Ironically the text has been used in an exclusive way. God may love the world, but only those who believe certain things, only those who follow certain practices, only those who agree on certain issues with a subset of people who call themselves Christians, the “true believers” — that is, those we’d like to avoid now and in eternity! It seems like some people just won’t be happy going to heaven unless hell is a crowded place.

I have shared with some of you the story of Molly Marshall’s interrogation by the Board of Trustees at Southern Seminary about her doctoral dissertation. She addressed the eternal fate of those who have never heard about Jesus, and since she didn’t conclude that they are all destined for hell, the more conservative trustees feared that she was too liberal, perhaps even a universalist, God forbid! So, one of them asked, “Dr. Marshall-Green, do you believe in the total depravity of man?” Molly replied, “Yes... and a few men women too.”

For those who don’t get the dated language, belief in the depravity of humankind leads to the necessity of the cross. Only an ultimate sacrifice can overcome the damning effects of sin. There can be no other way but to believe in Jesus. But if those who have never heard of Jesus cannot be saved, and there are billions of people who have never heard of him, then by entering the world, Jesus condemned these folk. Yet John 3:17 says God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Molly’s writing addressed this tension. Such people will be judged according to the light they have received, she said, and love will prevail.

“For God so loved...” the verse begins, “loved *the world*... so that *everyone* who believes... may have eternal life.” God’s love extends to

everyone, to “whosoever” in older translations, to the whole world. Thus, there is a social component to God’s love, an element of justice at work, the shaping of a different kind of community, because this love is extended to all people across all categories of distinction. The text doesn’t say all the white people who believe will have eternal life. It doesn’t say all the American people will or all the straight people will... It says *everyone* who believes... everyone!

Commenting on John 3:16, theologian Alicia Vargas references the life of African American leader Mary MacLeod Bethune (1875-1955) who grew up in the Jim Crow South and who Allen Dwight Callahan describes as an “educator, activist, and presidential advisor.” Bethune wrote these words about her experience with our text.

With these words (John 3:16) the scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. ‘Whosoever,’ it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just “whosoever.” It means that I, a humble negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day. (*workingpreacher.org*)

This all-inclusive nature of God’s love not only extends eternal hope for each individual across all differences; it also inaugurates a new kind of community where all are welcomed and embraced as equals. The ground is level before the cross, we say, we embrace this reality, but we also work for it. So, any effort to overcome barriers and prejudices, including the pursuit of racial justice, is therefore a central part of our calling, a living out of John 3:16. Yet again, this is not the teaching of all churches. In fact, some teach the opposite.

Baptist News Global carried a story this week about comments made by John MacArthur, pastor of the Grace Community Church in Los Angeles. MacArthur, a strict Calvinist whose primary focus is certainly not love — “What’s Love Got to Do with It?” might be his theme song — was criticizing the very conservative Together for the gospel group for honoring Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. a year after honoring R.C. Sproul. King was not a Christian at all, MacArthur said, his life was immoral. “I’m not saying (King) didn’t do some social good, and I’ve always been glad he was a pacifist or he could have started a real revolution,” MacArthur added. “But you don’t honor a non-believer who misrepresented Christ and everything about the Gospel in an organization alongside honoring someone like R.C. Sproul.”

Dr. King was a non-believer? And he misrepresented Christ and everything about the Gospel? I guess John didn’t really mean *whosoever* will... It is absurd that in the year 2024 there are still people who think like this, and many like MacArthur gather a huge following. Christ will decide who is misrepresenting him. I will choose to follow the traditional teaching that God so loves the world that everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but may have eternal life — which means everlasting life and an abundant life now — which means the pursuit of justice, the fair treatment of all, lies at the very heart of the Gospel.

But what does it mean to believe in Jesus? God’s love is for all who believe, and this may seem to have an exclusive dimension, but what does it mean? One perspective is that belief is about cognitive assent to certain theological propositions – that Jesus was God’s Son who died on the cross for our sins and was raised to give us hope for eternal life. Agree to this, sign on the dotted line, and we get salvation. Refuse to and we don’t. In this view, faith is a kind of transaction.

But while Christian faith has essential theological content, in John belief is about more than cognitive assent. It is about a trusting relationship and following Jesus in a way of life. We are called to believe *in* Jesus, not just believe certain things *about* him. We are to believe in him like we might believe in a parent to give us good advice, trust in a friend to help us. It’s about trust in Jesus and his way of life. In the other Gospels, Jesus calls people to follow him. John puts the language of “believing in” on Jesus’ lips, but it points to the same reality.

Consider the story that sets up our reading, the story of Nicodemus’ conversation with Jesus in the night. Nicodemus comes with a genuine interest in learning more about who Jesus is and what he teaches. Jesus talks about being born again or from above, and Nicodemus doesn’t understand.

So, Jesus says he is talking about a birth of the Spirit within us, a complete transformation of our very being.

This isn't a transaction; it's a process. This isn't simple and straightforward; it's mysterious. This is what believing in Jesus is about; it's about more than cognitive assent and holy transaction; it's about a transformation of life lived in intimate connection with God and following Jesus in a way of kindness and love. John says that those who don't believe in Jesus choose darkness over light, their deeds are evil, they act in hateful ways. The call to faith is a call to love and light.

Baptism provides a rich symbol of this reality. The way we are baptized, being immersed in water backwards, and then being pulled up, is a reflection of what the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans. "We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4)."

We die to old ways of hatred and animosity, guilt and judgment; and we rise to new ways of kindness and love, justice and mercy. That's what we profess in baptism. That's what it means to believe *in* Jesus. Today's reading from Ephesians says that by grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our doing, it is the gift of God. But the text goes on to say that we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, *for good works*. It's not just about what we believe, it's about how we live.

For years I have been haunted by a parody of the bad sermon written by C.S. Lewis' mother. It was based on the text, "Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard to give the poor dog a bone..." It goes on and on, elucidating the obvious without adding anything to the text.

The purpose of a good sermon is to add something not necessarily to the text but to our understanding of it. Better put, we seek to allow the text to speak for itself, or even better, to allow God to speak through it. That is my prayer today. It is just one verse, but one well worth our time. "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*." Amen, may it be so.