

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: March 14, 2021 Year B, 4th Sunday in Lent

Text: John 3:14-21

Title: A Good Sign

Focus: Though some have made John 3:16 to be a barrier to keep people out, John describes it as Good News of God's saving love for all the world.

Gospel Reading: John 3:14-21

[Jesus said:] ¹⁴“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“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.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Have You Seen this Sign?

John 3:16. (*Hold up a hand-crafted sign with “John 3:16,” just like they do at games.*)

You've seen this sign before, right?

- In public places like baseball games--You see it on the TV when the centerfield camera zooms in on home plate. There's a guy holding it in the stands behind the safety netting.
- Or you see it on TV when a football team lines up for a kick/the PAT after the touchdown.

And you've heard that verse before, right?

- “For God so loved the world . . .”

If there's any single verse that people have memorized, then that's got to be the one. It's got to be the most-recognized verse of scripture.

- ¹⁶"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.

How Have Your Heard this Passage Used?

- John 3:16 has got be the most widely-known verse in the Bible.
 - But does widely-known also mean "best-known" or "most well understood?"
 - Maybe we haven't understood this verse as well as we might think . . .

How have you heard this passage used? Or, to put the question slightly differently, **how have you seen John 3:16 used by some Christians within our culture?**

- It's been used as a litmus test—a way of determining "Who's in and who's out."
- At times, believers have used it with some arrogance which conveys something like, "We're on the inside and you're on the outside unless you do this. . ."

Rather than seeing 3:16 as a signal of God's desire to be in relationship with all people, this verse has become a weapon to declare some people are out—which is a declaration that would not have made sense to gospel writer John.¹

What does God want or intend? How would you describe that?

If we're not sure about God's intent as expressed in John 3:16, then there is further explanation in John 3:17 (as well as elsewhere in John. . .)

- ¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Reading just one more verse offers a larger context and, if we missed God's intent or motivation in verse 16, then we have additional explanation in verse 17. If we are in any way confused that God sends the Son out of love, then verse 17 offers the clear explanation, affirmation, and repetition that the Son was not sent to condemn but to save. So, it's not about who's in and who's out, but rather about God's consistent intent to love, save, and bless the *whole* world. The Son's mission was to *save* the world.

Who is this love for?

- This love is for Nicodemus, the one who initiated this conversation with Jesus, which starts at the beginning of chapter 3. He's identified as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. Interestingly, he came to Jesus *at night*, which suggests that

¹ See, for instance, the comments of Karoline Lewis at *Working Preacher* in the "Dear Working Preacher" column for March 5, 2017 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4835>

perhaps he was afraid or anxious about something—maybe about being discovered as one who was interested in Jesus.

- This love is for the Samaritan woman at the well, the next one to encounter Jesus, as told in John. Like Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, there is a time reference to this woman: She comes to draw water from the well during the heat of the day. It's likely she avoids the time when others will likely be there. She's on the outside in her community, perhaps ostracized by them. This love is for her.
- This love is for those who we know will gather around the table with Jesus, one who will betray him, one who will deny him, and all the others who will abandon him. Jesus still extends himself for them. Around that table, he offers them the bread and the cup. He offers them his very self.
- As described by John, God's love is directed to the whole world. Verses 16 and 17 are the heart of this passage and perhaps the whole gospel: Luther called John 3:16 "The Gospel in a nutshell," meaning that there's no better verse for capturing the good news of God's love and the nature of God.
 - God's love is directed to *the whole world*. That word is *kosmos* in Greek.
 - John makes no mention of the cross being for punishment or payment for sin. As expressed by John, the cross is not a mechanism that brings about salvation but the sign that *reveals* God's love for the wayward world most concretely.²
 - Between verses 16 and 17, *kosmos* or *world* is used 4 times. That repetition reinforces *God's love is for the whole world*.
- Thanks be to God; this love is for us. . .

Hear this good news from the *Sanctified Art* "Again and again" theme:

Hear this good news in the "Again and again" theme and in the "words for worship," such as in our Call to Worship:

- Before we said, "I love you,"
- Before we said, "I'm sorry,"
- Before we figured out who we really are or who we want to be,
- **God loved us.**
- God loved us. Again and again, this is where our story begins.

"Again and Again" Theme (again!)

And yet, in the midst of the motion blur chaos of our lives, God offers a sacred refrain: "I choose you, I love you, I will lead you to repair."

² David Lose, "Three Overlooked Elements of John 3:16." Posted March 5, 2018 at *In the Meantime*. <https://www.davidlose.net/2018/03/lent-4-b-3-overlooked-elements-of-john-316/>

Again and again, God breaks the cycle and offers us a new way forward.

I hope you've come to appreciate the beauty and poignancy of the artistic efforts, both the visual elements and written words, of the creative folks from *Sanctified Art*. I think they've captured well the human struggle with brokenness and sin and God's steadfast love in reaching out to us. Here's how they express that in the **Affirmation of Faith** (an excerpt)

We believe God is love—
 We believe this love exists for all,
 We believe that God loved first.
 And because we believe that God loved first,
 We strive to build lives that reflect God's love.
 May we begin again here.

I think they've captured the flow or the interaction between *grace* and human response to God:

. . . and because we believe that God loved first, we strive to build lives that reflect God's love.

Grace Theme of Ephesians 2:1-10

Hear this good news of God's grace, which is also expressed in today's Epistle reading from Ephesians:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

There is nothing we can do to earn God's love or deserve God's love. But, giving thanks to God for that grace, "we strive to build lives that reflect God's love."

John 3:16. It's a good sign of the love of God, don't you think?