



God So Loved

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 3:16 & 17

December 20, 2015

When I reached middle school, my mother enrolled me in confirmation class at the Presbyterian Church we attended. Confirmation Class was rigorous back in my day. We met with the pastor for two hours every Saturday morning over the course of two years, learning the Bible and the Presbyterian way.



You would have thought this class would have ignited a spark of faith in me. Not so! The concept of faith went right over my head. I was clueless. I was so consumed with my puny adolescent self that I couldn't get my head around the notion of God's great love for me.

I managed to learn one thing. Pastor Fulcomer made sure John 3:16 was drilled into our thick skulls: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." I memorized this verse, but it never traveled the requisite 18 inches from my head to my heart.

Today's topic is love. During these last four Sundays we call Advent, our focus has been hope, peace, joy and love. We chose these words since they coincide with the four Advent Candles we light at the beginning of worship each Sunday. Is there anyone here not looking for hope, peace, joy and love?

I have avoided preaching about love through the years. No doubt, it's a reaction to the overly sentimental view of love that has been adopted by our wider culture. Love has come to mean indiscriminate acceptance.

The Bible teaches us that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). The Bible also instructs us that God is just (Deuteronomy

32:4) and God is holy (Psalm 77:13). But we have elevated the attribute of God's love as superior to all the other attributes of God. Attributes such as justice and holiness are subservient to God's love. So, we are left with a distortion, a milquetoast God and a SpongeBob Jesus.



My intent today is to recover a Biblical understanding of love using John 3:16. This verse is well-known. I've seen it at sporting events. It's also prominently displayed on billboards and bumper stickers. Since each word is crucial in John 3:16, my plan is to walk through this verse word by word. Then, I will ask, as is our custom here, what difference does John 3:16 make in our lives?

“God so loved....” We have in our English language a single word for love. We use it indiscriminately to express our love for pets, hobbies and the people we love. The Greeks had four words for love. *Storge* refers to natural affection for family members. *Philia* is the Greek term for friendship. *Eros* is the word used for romantic love. *Agape* equates to God's love. *Agape* appears 37 times in John's gospel alone. *Agape* love is not based on the worth or merit of the receiver. Instead, it originates in the giver. God loves us not because of who we are but rather who God is. C.S. Lewis said that God loves us not because we are loveable, but because God is love.

“God so loved the world....” John warns Christians not to love the world (1 John 2:15-17). But here Jesus teaches that God loves the world, despite all its corruption and corresponding evil.

“God so loved the world that he gave....” Giving is endemic to God's nature. God's giving referenced in verse

16 equates to God sending his Son in verse 17. “God so loved the world that he gave” us Jesus.

“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son....” I was taught this verse with the old-fashioned word “begotten.” Begotten originates from the compound Greek word *monogenesis*: *mono* meaning only and *genesis* referencing birth. Jesus’ birth is unique. He’s one of a kind. God sends His very best; His one and only Son.

“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him....” Belief here is not mere intellectual assent. Belief equates with trust.

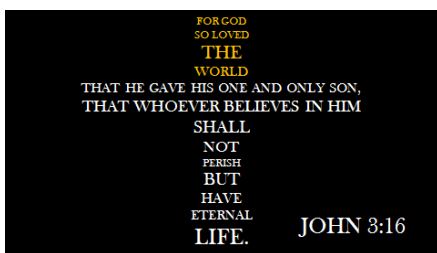
Charles Blondin was a famous tightrope walker in the 19th century. On June 30, 1859, before 100,000 spectators, Charles attempted to walk on a rope strung 1,000 feet (a quarter of a mile) over the Niagara Falls at a height of 160 feet. People placed bets on whether he would make it. Most bet against him. He was not only successful, he went on to perform the stunt 17 times. He walked the tightrope using stilts, riding a bicycle and wearing a blindfold. Once, he laid down on the rope, flipped over and walked backwards. He even carried a small stove on his back and prepared an omelet while balancing on a half-inch rope over the mighty Niagara.



For another stunt, he pushed a wheelbarrow from the American to Canadian side of the river. Upon his arrival on the Canadian side, he singled out a man in the crowd: “Do you believe I can carry a person across the falls in this wheelbarrow?” “Yes,” the man said. “Okay,” said Blondin, “get in.” The man refused. He believed Blondin could do it, but he was unwilling to act on this belief. Jesus said belief equates to trust.

“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish....” Belief in this verse leads to eternal life. Otherwise, we perish without God. There is no other option.

Perhaps you’re uncomfortable with the thought that God’s love includes judgment. Look at it this way. I love my adult children unconditionally. There is nothing they can do to cause me to stop loving them. When they were in high school, Chris and I imposed a curfew on them. If we told them to be home by midnight and they arrived at 2 AM, they could expect their parents’ wrath. Wrath was an expression of our love. What God offers in this passage is judgment on sin but grace for the sinner. There is no other rescue plan.



“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus speaks about

this eternal life in present tense. Eternal life does not begin in the distant future. Eternal life with Jesus begins now and extends indefinitely into the future.

Let’s walk through this verse using Dale Bruner’s words from his commentary on John’s gospel:

God is the greatest object ever.

Love is the greatest affection ever.

World is the greatest object ever.

His one and only Son is the greatest gift ever.

Whosoever believes is the greatest opportunity ever.

Would not perish is the greatest rescue ever.

Everlasting life is the greatest promise ever.

John 3:16 teaches us that God, as the greatest object ever, expresses the greatest affection ever, on the greatest object ever, by the greatest gift ever, by the greatest opportunity ever, by the greatest rescue plan ever, to give us the greatest promise ever.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Sooner or later, human love will disappoint us. No one can love us fully. There is no one on God's green earth who can love us completely.

The myth that perpetuates in popular culture is that another person can make us happy. If only I was dating or married to that person, I would be happy. Other people cannot make us happy. No one can love us fully in the way we want to be loved.

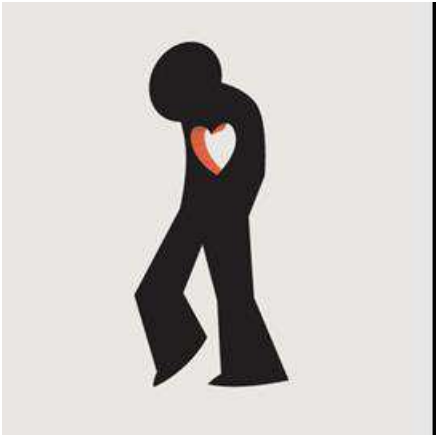


Couples will sometimes visit me because they are struggling in their marriage. It's not uncommon for one of them to say something like, "It shouldn't be this hard. Our love for each other ought to come more naturally."

When people talk this way, I'll interrupt them. "Why do you believe such nonsense?" It's not very empathetic, but it's nonsensical to believe that two flawed people can love each other easily and naturally. I never realized how selfish I was until I married. I still react to my wife out of self-interest. Marriage involves work. Mind you, it's good work to be done, but it's work to become unselfish in family relationships.

Would someone who aspires to play like a concert pianist regard practicing as something that comes easily and effortlessly? Would someone who desires to play major

league baseball treat learning to hit a curve ball as something that should come easily and effortlessly? Learning to play the piano or hit a curve ball involves hard work.



You may enjoy a good marriage. You may lay claim to having a great family. Yet, no one can love us completely. No one can fully satisfy our needs. This is where God comes into play. Only God can satisfy our deepest longings. No one can love us the way God loves.

God created us with these longings. The reason is rather simple. Since God cannot possibly give us anything beyond Himself, He gives us Himself. Jesus satisfies our deepest longings for hope, joy, peace and love.

Knowing I am loved by God becomes a major impetus for change. God's love compels me to change things about my life I don't like. I read a story this week about a 78-year-old woman named Aleida living in Rotterdam. She had been an avid smoker for 50 years. She had tried repeatedly to give up smoking, to no avail. Leo Jansen, her 79-year-old suitor, proposed marriage to Aleida on one condition—that she give up smoking. You know something? She gave up smoking. She said, "Willpower alone was never enough to get me off the habit. Love made me do it."

Let me speak for a moment to our guests. Perhaps the concept of John 3:16 is new to you. Consider this sermon as your invitation to explore what it means to follow Jesus with your life in the New Year. If and when you are ready to open yourself to God's love, there is no magic incantation or secret initiation rite required. You begin with prayer. Jesus, I open my heart to you. Come and make your home in my life.

For those who have been around awhile, this message is for us also. Open more of yourself to God's love. Ask for a fresh infusion of God's love into places where you need it. Perhaps you are discouraged. Maybe old resentments will come to the surface when you gather with family this Christmas. Ask God for a transfusion of love in places where you most need it.

God's love is the greatest object ever, by the greatest affection ever, working on the greatest subject ever, by the greatest gift ever, providing the greatest opportunity ever, to achieve the greatest rescue plan ever, to offer you the greatest promise ever.

