

John 3: 14-21 Lent 4

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John 3: 16. Even if you have never been to church before in your life you may have heard this quote before. It is without a doubt the MOST quoted verse in the Bible and it is the most visible. It is not unusual to see John 3:16 behind the goal posts at a football game, behind home plate at the baseball game or behind the net at the hockey game. It seems all we need to see is the heading John 3:16; we know what it is.

Now that in and of itself is not a problem. In fact it is a great way to draw attention to scripture however this week I have been reading about how this scripture may have limited us in our thinking about God and Jesus. And I wondered if any of you might feel this way, limited by what this particular passage says and I'm wondering if we can't open ourselves to this message in a new way.

Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer referred to the John 3:16 verse as the gospel in miniature. Recognising that the word "gospel" means "good news" meant that the good news was that believing in Jesus meant great stuff, believing meant living forever. Not on earth of course but in spirit, in the afterlife – salvation. Salvation was the main focus of past centuries. Living the good life beyond our earthly existence, good stuff!

In the 20th century the focus on the good news became not just about the afterlife but about this life as well that would extend into the afterlife and we in the 21st century are recognising that this good news, this gospel truth is still revealing itself to new generations of people living in this century. God's good news, God's gospel did not stop in the 20th or the 21st or the 15th or 17th centuries. It continues to be revealed to us if we are open to it.

It is easy to get into a rut of reading the Bible without ongoing interpretation. We see John 3:16 and immediately those of us who have been versed in Bible passages will know the words, "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." And we stop there! God in a box. Jesus in a box. Nice and neat. What more can you say? But there is so much more to say.

In fact this one single verse in the Bible has been the motivation for some of the most destructive and unchristian impulses throughout history that we have ever seen. Taken literally this verse had enabled and even encouraged such events as the Christian Crusades against Muslims in the Middle Ages; the Holocaust of the Jews in our lifetime; and the Christian missionary work that our own church participated in with our Aboriginal peoples. We did not stop at changing their spiritual or religious beliefs we also wanted to stamp out their language and culture. We wanted to put them in the box, self contained, ordered, like us. The toll of these kinds of strict adherence to the literal word of John 3:16 is still seen today through our acts of discrimination and squirming in

our seats at the very mention of Native peoples and Muslims. Yes, taken literally this verse becomes the cornerstone of belief that includes the rejection of those different from us, the dominance of women by men, or that sense of entitlement our western countries have over the rest of the world. (Tim Johnson, The Centre For Progressive Christianity, *Journey Toward Faith: A Lenten Sermon on John 3:16*)

It is interesting and even ironic to note that of the four Gospel writers John is noted as the least of the four to be literal in his writing. The gospel writers were seeking to communicate a faith, they were not historians concerned about getting the facts down right and John is the one who takes the greatest literary licence reworking and rewording in the telling of Jesus' work and time on earth. In fact one has to wonder if Jesus might be a bit horrified at the rigid nature in which we interpret his words and meaning even today. Jesus himself rarely gave a straight on factual sermon instead he told parables and used metaphor to communicate his message. Something the people of his time would understand.

This very situation in our reading today serves as an example. Nicodemus is stuck on the literal example Jesus has given of being born and asks, "How you can be born a second time from your mother's womb"? Jesus is shocked that Nicodemus doesn't get it and shows his shock when he says, "You are a teacher of faith and yet you are unable to understand what I am saying"? Jesus is asking Nicodemus to open his mind. And again Nicodemus and many of us still have missed the point Jesus is trying to make. We miss the opportunity to go deeper into our relationship with God.

This opportunity follows right after verse 16 when Jesus tries to bring Nicodemus up to speed, and it alone and of itself may just be Jesus' true message to us, the gospel in miniature if you will, the verse to build our cornerstone of belief; or is it? Verse 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."

You see Jesus was not at all interested in a single saying that would capture ones belief system to make it the be all and end all of acceptance or rejection by God. A bumper sticker saying that would be all we needed to know. Both Jesus and the writer of John's gospel were much more interested in us understanding how we come to have faith? How do we experience God in order to grow and mature in that experience? Is our interest in deepening our walk with God or creating belief systems that exclude?

It is suggested by Tim Johnson of the Centre for Progressive Christianity that there are three formative influences on our spiritual lives and our encounter with God. He goes on to state that these are not exhaustive but they are important to our spiritual growth.

First is a community of faith. This too is central to the United Church of Canada's stance on belief. We belong to a community of faith. We express that faith within a community of faith. The "I" model of salvation is not as important as the collective wisdom and experience of a group of believers. We have a role to fulfill as community for the common and greater good of all. The prayers we pray together, the hymns we sing, the support we give and receive reflect who and where we are in our spiritual lives. It is

important to pay attention to what is being read, said, and sung in our services. Do they reflect who we are?

Second is our service, our caring for others. The fact that we raise money for Mission and Service; we donate to the local foodbank; we pray for our church family; we offer ourselves in service to our community keeps our faith alive and well. Nicodemus comments, "No one can do the things you do apart from the presence of God." Caring and compassion are what keep us growing in our faith. We encounter God in those places where our hearts are open and we are responding to need.

Third is being open to the guiding Spirit of God. There are some tough but important questions to ask yourself in order to be open to the guiding Spirit of God. Are you willing to let go of your certainties about who God is? Are you ready to experience God in new ways? Are you ready like Abraham and Sarah to step out on a journey with God without the comfort of knowing exactly where it will lead you?

These questions and many more are part of doing discernment in the United Church to see if you are being lead into ministry. It is the questions you are asked when entering theological studies as well. Ask anyone who attends a mainline Theological College and they will tell you the number one reason people drop-out of theological college is their inability to answer these questions in such a way that they can grow in their faith. The Theological Professors call it being stuck in your Sunday school story theology. Now, don't hear this wrong, there is nothing wrong with Sunday school story theology if you are in Sunday school; however there comes a time when those stories can teach us so much more and reveal to us a deeper understanding of the love of God.

The gospel of John is attempting to portray to us the depth of God's love, not to create a belief system that would save some and reject others. John wanted us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God could be encountered through Jesus, in community, in serving others, in being open to God's Spirit guiding us to love one another as God so loved us.

Amen