

Is there a more familiar passage in all of Christian scripture than John 3:16? You see “John 3:16” on signs at football games or printed on t-shirts. You see it on posters, bookmarks and plaques. You can find the verse on a plaque in our own narthex. You can find “John 3:16” printed on the bottom of soda cups at In-and-Out Burger restaurants all over the Southwest and you can see it printed on the bottoms of the shopping bags from the clothing store, Forever 21. There’s no question that “John 3:16” is truly popular and prominent, but I hesitate to call the passage *well-known*. In fact, I’d go further and say that, in some ways, this little snippet of a deep and rich conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus actually suffers from over-familiarity.

Even some of our Bibles may be adding to the problem. Many translations—including the New Revised Standard version that Episcopalians typically use—many translations set this single sentence apart from the surrounding verses. But there is nothing in the Greek text to suggest that this one verse should be that prominent. Separating the verse from what comes before and after makes the sentence easily understood to imply that the primary purpose of Jesus’s life and ministry on earth was to provide us with a personal transaction that would guarantee eternal life. “All I have to do is believe and God will give me eternal life in heaven after I die.”

Without the surrounding verses, John 3:16 can lead people to the conclusion that Jesus brought God’s contract to us and that Christianity is a religion of obligations and compensations; of conditions and rewards. If you believe or behave correctly, then your reward is heaven. The result is that our lives as Christians, the life we are given to live in the “here and now,” is reduced to some version of an escape plan or fire insurance. Our Christian actions become not much more than making sure that have taken care of our life in the “then and there.” But that contradicts the rest of Scripture, the ancient teaching of our mothers and fathers in the faith, and the insights of our own catechism. Right there in the back of the Book of Common Prayer, we say that “grace is God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved.” There is no contract. “We praise God, not to obtain anything,” according to our catechism, “but because God’s being draws praise from us.” And the

mission of the Church, at least for Episcopalians, is not self-preservation but “...to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” *All people.*

Last week, we heard about Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem at Passover, reminding a hide-bound group of people that the whole purpose of the Passover feast was to pursue liberation and salvation for all people. And when Jesus drove the sacrificial animals out of the temple and demanded that the temple be unbound, he must have irritated the Sadducees mightily. The Sadducees essentially ran the temple system that Jesus was critiquing. They were highly conservative and aristocratic Jews active during the Second Temple period. The Sadducees tended to be wealthy and held powerful positions, including that of chief priests and high priest. They also held the majority of the 70 seats of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin.

But there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus who also sat on the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus was also a man of privilege and entitlement, but he was in disagreement with the Sadducees. As a Pharisee he and Jesus had much more in common philosophically and religiously. In fact, there is reasonable scholarly speculation that Jesus was raised as a Pharisee. And so Jesus’ actions in the temple must have also caught Nicodemus’ attention because here, in the chapter that immediately follows the temple story, Nicodemus has come to Jesus in the night for fear of being seen by other members of the Sanhedrin. He has recognized Jesus as a rabbi, and is asking him deep and probing questions. Without condemning Nicodemus’ understanding, Jesus invites him—and you and I—into a deeper embrace.

“For God so loved the world...” We can hear Jesus saying: “God loved the world so *very much, so fully and so completely...*” and these are all true of God’s love. But the Greek phrase that John’s Gospel uses is more accurately rendered as: “*In this way, God loved the world*” or “*Here’s how God loved the world.*” The way that God loved creation was to *give* the only begotten one. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Spirit descends from heaven onto Jesus; in John, it is Jesus, the only begotten child of God, who has ascended into and descended from heaven. With that voice of authority, Jesus is testifying that those who *trust and bond* with the Beloved One will not perish, *not because we have fulfilled a contractual obligation*, but because we, too, have become God's off-spring, children of God.

In that way we receive from God the same family honor and character that God has; and we owe God the same loyalty that blood relatives give to each other.

“This is the way that God loved the world. God gave the world the only begotten child, so that everyone who trusts and bonds with that child may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the only begotten One into the world to judge creation, but in order that creation might be saved through that One. Those who trust and bond with him are not judged; but those who hesitate and are disloyal to him are already judged, because they have not trusted in the family name of the only begotten.”

God has loved us, God does love us and God will love us. God loves us not because we have behaved correctly or because we have agreed to a checklist of doctrines or even because we call ourselves Christians. God loves us because God *is* love. Loving is what God does and God’s love abides. God’s love is wild and unconditional, not transactional. God simply delights in loving us because it is the essence of God’s being. And that is the essence that came to us in the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ, the only Begotten child. That is the essence that comes to us and among us and within us in the Risen Christ made known to us in worship, in prayer, in service to others and, in God’s own time, in a new existence that unites all of creation in God’s joy.

Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, author of several of my favorite books on spirituality, has suggested that we are still a long way from trusting and bonding with the Word made Flesh, and in that way taking on the family name. “Do we ever really take the unconditional love of God seriously?” he writes. “Do we ever really take the joy of God seriously? Do we ever really believe that God loves us long before any sin we commit and long after every sin we commit? Do we ever really believe that God still, unconditionally, loves Satan, and everyone in hell, and that God is even now willing to open the gates of heaven to them? Do we ever really take seriously how wide is the embrace of God? Do we ever believe Julian of Norwich when she tells us that God sits in the center of heaven, smiling, his face completely relaxed, looking like a marvelous symphony?<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Rolheiser, Ronald. *Against an Infinite Horizon: The Finger of God in Our Everyday Lives*. Rev. ed. New York: Crossroad Pub., 2001.

These are fantastic questions to be pondering during Lent, because as Rolheiser concludes, “the deep struggle of all religion is to enter into the joy of God.”

As Jesus continues to offer light to Nicodemus there under the cover of night and to us here in the darkness of this Lenten season, Jesus also points to a sobering truth. Even if we have seen the light, we can still choose the darkness. We can choose not to be in relation to God. We can choose to fearfully imagine salvation to be a limited guarantee for the “there and then” and reject the life-sustaining intimate relationship that God deeply yearns for with us in the “here and now.”

Choose life instead. Choose light. Choose love. We have been lifted up with Christ and can trust our inheritance as children of God. *We are* the body of Christ on earth. Not simply *like* his body or a replacement for his body or even just a metaphorical body. We may be a mystical body, but only because we carry the mystery of God in human flesh, as did our brother Jesus. Those whose lives we unbind are unbound by Christ—touched by Christ in specific, tangible, physical form—because we are the on-going incarnation of Christ. Those we love are loved by Christ because we love them in grace. Those whom we forgive are forgiven by Christ because it is Christ forgiving them. When we love people who have lost their faith or who never came to faith or who simply no longer come to church, *still*, they are bound solidly to the body of Christ through our love for them and their love for us.

“We don’t have to save ourselves,” Rolheiser writes, “we don’t have to get our lives perfectly in order to be saved...human flesh and this world are not obstacles, but part of the vehicle to heaven; we can help each other on the journey; love, even human love, is stronger than death, and to love someone is indeed to say: ‘You at least will never die!’<sup>2</sup>”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.