

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son and whosoever believeth in him, shall not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16 (KJV)

John 3:16. Ask someone to quote a Bible verse, any verse, and it may prove difficult. But ask them to quote John 3:16 and you're in business. It's the perfect verse for a bumper sticker, a plaque on the wall, a sign at a protest march, or... I once had a co-worker have this verse fly across a computer monitor as a screen-saver. Even our son, Evan - at a young age, could recite this verse forward and backward.

One day, Evan came to me and asked, "Mom...what about those people who don't believe in God? Will they perish? And what does perish mean, anyway? I surmised Evan had a little agenda behind his inquiry, but at the moment, I was scrambling for the right words to respond to him. And in those moments where he was looking for an answer...I have to admit that those same questions had crossed my mind, too. I don't remember exactly how I responded (I'm sure it was profound), but it seemed to satisfy him for the time being. And I let it go at that.

So now, here I am, many years later preaching on a text which alluded to such simplicity for me in the past, only to find out this text *can be* problematic. Problematic in the face of God's unconditional love for all things. All things - the cosmos. You see, John 3:16 has become a kind of trademark for evangelical Christians - a way to reduce and simplify the statement to a slogan - which has proved to create division and dangerous activities all within God's kingdom.

The verse appears so simple and straightforward, but it's not. In fact, I like to stop at the part where 'God so loved the world'... but then I think of my neighbor, the one who cut down my tree and showed no remorse. You see, I would like to narrow the parameters of God's worldview and be the title-holder of God's love - after all, I work hard. I serve in the ministry. I serve the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed.

The second part of the verse: "For God so loved the world) ...*that God gave his son - his only son, so that (in this way) everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*" In essence, this part sounds pretty cut-and-dried, too. And if I take it literally and out of context, this certainly wouldn't include that neighbor of mine, because he never goes to church or volunteers at the local food pantry, never professes a belief in God and his political ideals are drastically different from mine. That's comforting to an extent because I know my future is secured. But then... that even becomes problematic for me, because what about the person who has never experienced God's love?

What about the brokenhearted, or the people who have lost everything due to circumstances or are a part of systems that have created generational poverty. And what about those who were raised with the concept of a punishing God and have given up on any belief in God? And what about people who express compassionate love in different ways - who don't fit the mold that *my/our* Christianity has created? And...what about sin? Mine, yours, the church at large?

You see, this... is where it becomes very problematic for me. Because if I am to grasp, what Luther called the "gospel in a nutshell", then I need to see God's love in a way that believes God is fundamentally a God of love and **that** love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs, and God's love surpasses everything else, even justice, in the end."

Therefore, John 3:16 condenses God's entire plan from the beginning into this tiny "nutshell" of a verse. The good news that Jesus came to proclaim, to die for and to resurrected..is out of this 'bigger than life' love of God. And if this is the case, what do I do with my neighbor? What do I do with the pain and suffering of the world? What do I do with my tendencies to judge and condemn others? And I don't know what that looks like for the Putins and Netanyahus, and all empires who maim, kill and trample hundreds of thousands of innocent people. What do we do with evil? Or sin? John 3:16 is getting a lot more problematic as I go along. But one thing I have come to learn about God's kingdom, ignoring the pain and suffering in the world, is to ignore the "rest of the story." "*For God so loved the world that he sent his only son...*" However, living in the light of God's love implies darkness, too. You can't have one, without the other.

We are reminded of that in the gospel today. We are also reminded, that according to John, judgment...is not connected to a future time...it's a present reality. John's love found in the cross includes all things. All things. But it also reveals every ugliness in and about us. John's gospel is telling us that now is the judgment time, because what happens to love when we don't live by love? It perishes. It dies.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because what they were doing was not life-giving. Living in the darkness, you see, does not require anything of us. It keeps us and our brokenness in the shadows at times. But God, however, will not let the world that he loves perish; will not let it suffer complete ruin or destruction and will not leave me and you in the darkness and shadows, either.

The light that hangs on the cross exposes the darkness. In me, in you. So how in the world did this bumper-sticker-billboard-statement of Jesus become so complex and I can't say for you, but for me...down right disturbing. Maybe, just maybe...it isn't just about my neighbor?

We all experience death and destruction when our words and actions and sinfulness don't gel with God's love. The Israelites in the book of Numbers today were

given a way out of their so-called darkness. Their grumbling and complaining had finally caught up to them. This time, they are claiming that God had brought them out to die. Out in the wilderness...no food, no water..AND they detested the miserable food they had!

Their repentance, however, is forthcoming but not before they are swarming in poisonous serpents where one bite would cause death -and it did. "Help," they said. "Help Moses, ask God to get rid of these snakes." And God... in his gracious mercy and infinite love for all things, provides a way out. Moses is instructed to make a bronze snake and if the people are bitten, they look up at the pole and they will live.

Notice here - God does not take away the serpents. And God does not remove us from the painstaking challenges and the ugliness in the world. But God always offers a way out...and that...that, is attached to the gift of grace. However, the gift of grace is not always pretty. Living into God's grace demands that we extend it to others...and that is not easy when we are living in an us and them mentality. The gift of grace is hard to follow day-in-and day-out as we navigate our lives in the midst of pain and suffering and sin. The gift of grace, you see...well.. exactly that...a gift. The gift of grace and the glory of the cross enables us to expose the darkness which keeps us from living fully into the abundance of God's love - and love for those we perceive as out of the circle of love. "For God so loved the world...everything."

I thought perhaps this would be where I end today.

However, living in the light requires sacrifice, it certainly did for Jesus. But do we live in the light - only when we can afford to? When darkness seems miserable and comfortable all at the same time? And love our enemies? Maybe if everything else is taken care of first. And Vulnerability? Only if there is no other choice.

The kind of self-sacrificing love Jesus offers is frightening, at times. No wonder we find ourselves working harder in the shadows of all kinds of stuff that condemns the love God has for creation, instead...instead of coming to the grace of God - a God who loves the whole world...even...my neighbor.

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For God so loved the world...is not an exclusionary tale. It is a story of love that speaks truth all the way to the cross. It is a kind of love that heals the brokenhearted, is deeply embedded with the children of Gaza, is deeply embedded with victims of war and hatred, and deeply embedded in you...and me. So when we find ourselves mired in fiery serpents, darkness that "seems" to overcome...we are given a way out. Because the one whose steadfast love...Sumud, makes it possible for us to come to live in truth and come to the light not once, not twice, but to come, and come, and come - just as you are. *This is the Easter story.*

So Evan, what happens to those who don't appear to be part of the equation of John 3:16? ? Will they perish?

Evan...I believe in a God who lifts high the cross, and who intercedes on behalf of the world's pain and suffering. You see, Evan the redeeming and transformative power of God was prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

By the way, there was a hidden agenda behind Evan's inquiry. He was thinking about the family down the street. He saw, first hand, the pain and suffering of this family as they dealt with a devastating disease of not one, but two of their children. Their other two children were struggling in their own way. And every Sunday when we passed their house on our way to church, Evan would say, "I wish the Shoemaker's could come to our church." I caught a glimpse into Evan's heart that day. Perhaps my heart, too. And you can well imagine how shocked I was when the family show up in church the following Sunday. And I caught a glimpse of moisture in my son's eyes. Mine, too.

So Evan, Paula, Shar, Bill, First Lutheran and the church at large and the nations, lift high the cross...that all may be healed. For God so loved - so loves... the world... Amen.