

## Altered Through a Broadening Circle

John 3:14-21

March 10, 2024

Rev. Scott Anderson

In my third grade Sunday School class the primary teaching method was to memorize important verses in the Bible, using King James Version. And while that pedagogy has fallen out of favor, it still amazes me that at critical moments in my life I've been able to call up those verses effortlessly. John 3:16, our New Testament text this morning, is one of them.

If you know it, say it along with me, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This is a great verse that's packed full of big ideas, but it's not an easy verse. And sometimes when we try to use it as a stand-alone summary of Christianity, there's a danger that we turn it into something simple, a predictable formula or reliable life recipe that people can trust. But it's not that easy, because the Gospel of John isn't written for those of us who like things to be straightforward.

Yes, John 3:16 is one of the most beloved verses in the Bible. But I wonder whether, if people thought about what this verse says for just a little longer than it takes to read a bumper sticker, it might just prove to be one of our least favorite verses in the Bible. Let me explain.

Jesus articulates in this statement what Luther called "the Gospel in a nutshell" – that God is fundamentally a God of love, that love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs, and that God's love trumps everything else, even justice, in the end.

I realize not everyone reads it this way. After all, Jesus says "everyone who believes..." will have eternal life, which perhaps implies a different outcome for those who don't believe.

But read on, for in the next verse Jesus states that, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Period.

Moreover, the "judgment" to come is not punishment but simply the crisis that befalls those who will not come out of the darkness for fear of the light. It is not judgment as punishment, but judgment as crisis, as tragedy, as loss. God comes in love to redeem such loss, turn such tragedy into victory, and demonstrate true power through sheer vulnerability and sacrifice.

Which is the first reason we might not name this as our favorite verse if we gave it any real thought, as our world – and quite often our lives – operate according to the more traditional belief that security comes not through vulnerability and sacrifice but through power and might. Oh, we probably don't go around wearing t-shirts that say, "might makes right," but many of us live according to such logic regularly. For we live in a world that seeks security not only through power but also through wealth and consumption, and we are taught from an early age to avoid true vulnerability – and the truly vulnerable – at all costs. So, sacrifice? Sure, when we can afford to. Love our enemies? Maybe if everything else is taken care of first. Vulnerability? Only if there is no other choice.

The kind of self-sacrificing love Jesus offers here is frightening to such a world. No wonder some run and hide, as it requires us to trust nothing other than God.

And most of us find it impossible to embrace Jesus' example, except when we ourselves have been brought low by illness, or loss, or a broken relationship, or disappointed hopes or some other way by which the world taught us that no matter how hard we try, no matter what position we may achieve, no matter how much money we may save, yet we cannot secure our

destiny or save our lives. Only God can do that. Only love can do that. And it's frightening to be so utterly dependent on God.

Here's a second reason we may not name this as our favorite verse in the Bible. New Testament theologian Marcus Borg warns that, taken literally, John 3:16 turns Christianity into a religion of requirements and rewards.<sup>1</sup> The reward is heaven. The requirements, of belief or behavior or both, are a means of reaping the reward. Christianity, understood this way, becomes contractual. "I'll do this for you, God, if you this for me." And many of us take for granted this is the way things are.

Borg points out this understanding is at times reinforced in the Assurance of Forgiveness in our worship liturgy, which can proclaim that only those who believe will be saved. But this contradicts the ancient teaching, the biblical teaching, the Reformation teaching, that salvation is unmerited, God-given, not a reward, not a contract.

Borg goes on: another problem in emphasizing the afterlife is that it turns Christianity into a religion of self-preservation, where the most important spiritual question becomes, "How can I make sure I will live forever?" And a final problem arises for Borg: people are divided into saved and unsaved. All non-Christians, even many Christians, are suspected of being unsaved.

Emphasis on the afterlife alters the attention we pay to this life, making systemic change in our world relatively unimportant, and personal obedience very important. Borg notes, in the Bible, salvation is about transformation in this life, not about going to heaven. In the Bible, the roots of the word salvation are in rescue and deliverance in this life, not the next.

Borg offers these biblical images of salvation:

- **Salvation as Liberation from Bondage** – the Exodus.
- **Salvation as Return from Exile**, the return of ancient Israel from Babylon and slavery.
- **Salvation as Light in Darkness and Sight to the Blind**. People walk in deep darkness, and many who have sight, cannot see – Jesus urges those who have eyes, to see anew.
- **Salvation as Life to the Dead**. Just as some sighted people are blind, some living people are dead. There is a way of living that amounts to being dead, Jesus teaches.
- **Salvation as Food and Drink** is about distributive justice, everyone having enough, and also about our hunger and thirst for more than a material life.
- **Salvation as Being Saved from Sin**. Forgiveness means our misdeeds and betrayals are not the last word about us, or to us from God.

This broader understanding of salvation, looking at the full sweep of the Biblical story, is about love *and* justice, about personal obedience and social transformation, all of which, I believe, give John 3:16 a whole new meaning.

This week America is observing the 59th anniversary of the March on Selma, which was really a series of three events: Bloody Sunday, when the marchers were beaten and tear-gassed and not allowed to leave Selma; Turn Around Tuesday, when Martin Luther King led the already-bruised and highly anxious marchers to the crest of the bridge, sensed that the police below might again attack the marchers, knelt, prayed, and turned back, now calling on the nation to come and march with him the following weekend. Thousands rallied, including celebrities

---

<sup>1</sup> Convictions, by Marcus Borg, 2014, Harper One. Chapter 4: Salvation is More About This Life than an After Life

and many religious leaders, and together they marched the whole way to Montgomery, protesting the denial of voting rights to Black Americans in Alabama and in most of the South.

All of this was based on some courageous theology, in which people dared to say they were not saved, they were living in bondage, they were outcasts and exiles, they were in deep darkness, and this was not God's doing, and not God's will.

They lived surrounded by many white people who were blind to their suffering, who were spiritually dead. And Black people were willing to say this, to say they longed for life in this world, and were dead to hope unless they marched as they did. They marched for food and drink, and for the right to vote to end poverty, and they dared to understand this marching as sacramental, as a visible expression of God's love and justice.

And for the days in which they marched, women gathered in church kitchens and churned out thousands of sandwiches and vats of coffee to sustain them. In all of this, they dared to hope that they were being saved; from the dreadful sins of their nation, and the personal sins of despair, addiction, misery of the soul, into which many of them had fallen.

Those who opposed them and supported violent police repression of these marches, also cited the Bible, using passages about slaves obeying their masters, about accepting what their rulers tell them. These were the old and cruel understandings of a contractual god.

What was new was the theology of the Civil Rights Movement, which dared to articulate the meaning of salvation as transformation from fear to courage, from blindness to new sight, from hunger and thirst to satisfaction in spirit, from bondage to liberation.

The courage of Black America, and their theology, has given life and sight to a broadening circle of gay people, to women, to immigrants, to people with disabilities, to the poor around the world. We owe them a huge debt for setting all our sight on freedom and a gracious God, on everlasting life in this world, and not just in the next.

Amen.