

Sermon for Trinity Church

Trinity, 2024

"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. "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.

John 3:16. I suspect there are few people in the Western world, and indeed in most nations, who couldn't quote the words from this verse, even if they are not Christians. Years ago, I saw the verse lifted as a sign at sporting and cultural events, a kind of witness to the power of these words. So, let's try it, without looking down, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Indeed, we are so familiar with those words that unless we take a deep dive into them, we may not know how surprising and risky, yes, can be risky, the words are.

John, the author of this Gospel wrote that "for God so loved the world" and at once, at an immediate level, we get it. God loves this world and without unpacking why God loves this world, (something the Gospel of John has done earlier and will do again), John asserts something so profound that it can strengthen everything we know and believe. If we step back and think about it, God loves this world and God being God, we can rely on this love. Is it fact? Fiction? Can we prove this love? All Good questions that Jesus will answer with his teaching and life, but John's starting point is this—that God so loved this world of ours that God gave the Son to the world.

Now two things must work in our mind at the same time—that the love that God employed was "agape," the sort of selfless love that puts others' needs before our own. It's almost as if we could call it heroic love, a love that cares so much for others that our preparation to sacrifice for that love is always implied. And there's more to make the point; when John says that God gave God's only son we need to think about "gave" because the meaning of "gave" will color everything after this. If God gave Jesus to the world, does that mean that the world took possession, that the world owned Jesus? Yes, and in fact, we could even say that with more emphasis, that God "turned over" Jesus to the world. If God was making a gift, John makes it clear that it was a no-hold-barred kind of gift, complete and without strings. If God only pretended that God turned over Jesus, that would be like playing Monopoly with my sister—in her mind, she could take back any move or money any time she wanted! Nope, this is a once and forever gift so that what we do with Jesus means everything.

The "only" in "only son" only emphasizes this even more, a sacrifice that's quite frankly, as a father, beyond my comprehension.

So, two more words before we get to "eternal life." John writes that "everyone" who believes in Jesus will be rewarded. John, do you mean absolutely everyone? Really, everyone? Are there limits such as, you must believe always? Or can you wishfully desire that Jesus was real and if he was, believing would be so cool? And so on. Strangely enough, or should I say wonderfully enough, John posts no limits to the term "everyone." Every one, means everyone so we can embrace every being.

We can add one more challenging word, "believes." Please tell me what does it mean to "believe?" If you thread your way through the *Gospel of John*, and in indeed, all the Bible, you'll find the term "believing" shades into several forms. Believing can mean a person trusts that the idea or person they believe in is true. And believing can mean having faith, which is like trust but without trust's fine sense of certainty. Believing can also imply you hold something to be true, even if only in your own mind and heart, with or without factual support.

We can tell which way John comes down by following the remainder of 3:16 that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. "Perish" can mean a few things, chief among them is death but it can also mean the loss of what we hold dear, the failure of our hopes and dreams. In short, if we perish as John is talking about perishing, it's not just physical death we fear but indeed the loss of everything we hold dear. If I lost my family, my home, my parish, my community, that would be a kind of death, a death that much of the world, including Gaza and the Sudan, truly understands.

The opposite then of "perish" must be eternal life. There's a profoundness in that expression "eternal life" that sets God's gift of Jesus apart from every other gift; God takes an enormous risk turning Jesus over to humanity. But the prize is worth it—that everyone (there's that word, everyone again) that everyone will have eternal life. Notice now, and this is very important, that nothing John has said so far points only to heaven, to life after death. Sure, life after death is implied, and though Jesus rarely speaks of it, he does assure that life to us. But here's the powerful, almost overwhelming truth, that eternal life begins right now for those who believe. If you think, believe, trust that God agapes the world, everyone in the world, then we have it made. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, with a God like ours, nothing, not anyone or any being, challenge or threat, can ever come between us and the love of God. Get a grasp on that, friends, because the Good News is just beginning. Amen.