

Gospel in a Nutshell

John 3:14-21

What's the most familiar Bible verse? Maybe it is Psalm 23:1, when we're reminded that the Lord is my shepherd. Maybe it is Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Maybe it is the one we've heard at the beginning of our Lent Midweek services, Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

For many, the answer is in our Gospel lesson today. John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The Gospel in a nutshell. It was so popular, so well known, that you could find it on signs in the back of the end zone, back when there were real people there instead of cardboard cutouts.

As popular as it is, as well-known as it is, though, it isn't always understood. Even the one who first heard John 3:16 didn't understand it, at least at first.

Our Gospel reading today is a monologue, but it started as a dialogue. Nicodemus was a high-ranking Pharisee who came to Jesus at night asking questions, seeking to understand who Jesus was. He was curious, but confused. He had questions for Jesus, but didn't want others to know about them, or that he was coming to Jesus for answers. By the time we get to verse 14, his comments are done for this encounter. He seems to have been left speechless by Jesus' talk of the need to be born again, and talk of the Holy Spirit being like wind. He came to Jesus at night, and left as much in the dark as he came. It would take Jesus being lifted up for him to see the truth.

But if we want to understand this verse, let's look at it piece by piece. If we look at each part, we can understand the whole better.

"For God so loved" God loved. God loves. God is love. What does this mean? Pastor Max Lucado once described God's love like this; "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning... Face it, friend. He is crazy about you!" For God so loved.

For God so loved the world. This isn't just about loving a certain group of people. It isn't even just about loving people. It's about loving the world. It's about loving the cosmos. It's about loving all that has been created.

It's also about loving the world in the sense that includes people who don't love God. People who could care less about God. People who reject God. People who say, "I don't need God." The Bible teaches that God so loved the world, yet the world doesn't love God in return. As John says in the prologue of his Gospel, [Jesus] was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him" (John 1:10-11).

That is part of what makes this truly amazing, what is truly amazing, that the intensity of God's emotion, the intensity of God's love, is not just directed towards Christians. That the intensity of God's love is not just directed towards church people. That the intensity of God's love is not just directed to you and your little life or me and my little life. The intensity of God's love is for the world. Even those who reject it.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. His unique, one of a kind,

irreplaceable son. God didn't just give something easily replaceable. God didn't give something that was a dime a dozen. God gives something that is priceless. His only Son.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him.” This gift doesn't come with a bunch of disclaimers. It doesn't come with those terms of service agreements we just click through without reading. It comes freely. Even belief is a gift of the Holy Spirit! We can refuse to believe. We can refuse to trust. But that doesn't change the nature of the gift that is free to us, but cost God everything.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Eternal life is not just about what happens after we die. It's not just about heaven or being with Jesus or the world to come. It's about the here and now. In some ways, it's similar to the way the other Gospel writers use the phrase “kingdom of God.”

God loves you. God loves the whole world. God gave Jesus in love for the world so we could have eternal life. It's why we can use grace as an acronym. “God's Riches at Christ's Expense.”

Jesus was lifted up on the cross so the whole world could see God's love in action. Many who saw it didn't see what it truly meant. Many walked by and laughed. They looked but did not truly see. But some looked up and saw Jesus as he truly was, as he truly is. A Roman centurion, no stranger to death, looked up and said “Surely, he was the son of God!”

Nicodemus, once Jesus was lifted up, would come out of the darkness into the light, to help Joseph of Arimathea carry Jesus from the cross to the tomb. The power of God working through those words of Jesus must have kept working on Nicodemus until he knew the answer to all of the questions he'd had was Jesus. Nicodemus then went to Jesus even after

all of his other disciples had run away to hide. Once Jesus was lifted up, some would turn to him in faith, and they would be saved.

Eventually others would come to see what Nicodemus and the centurion did. Because Jesus was lifted up on the cross, what was once a symbol of death would become a symbol of life. What was once used to remind people of their powerlessness before the Roman Empire became a reminder of how powerful God is.

When Martin Luther was struggling with his doubts and depression, his father confessor, John Staupitz, pointed him to Christ. Luther found Christ most fully revealed on the cross. He found disdain and derision, desertion by friends, death surrounded by those who deserved to die, and God. He found the paradox of great humiliation and great exaltation as Jesus was lifted up on the cross. The cross revealed the judgment of God that no human work could make humanity successful. It was God's everlasting no to the idolatry of making yourself like God, the idolatry the serpent tempted Adam and Eve with. But the cross was also God's yes to his children, the greatest example of love the world will ever see.

God did not send Jesus into the world to judge the world. The punishment is already all around us. God sent Jesus out of love. That's why Martin Luther called John 3:16 the gospel in a nutshell, and others have followed his lead. It continues to be one of the most popular, well-known Bible verses.

When we hear John 3:16, it is the Gospel in a nutshell. It summarizes the Good News about Jesus. God loved you enough to send Jesus. God still loves you, and nothing can separate you from that love. Because God loves you, you have been justified; you have been made right with God. It's a free gift to you that cost Jesus everything. That is the Good News for today, and the best news you'll ever hear.

Pastor David Beagley, Memorial Lutheran Church
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