

March 11, 2018 • Fourth Sunday in Lent

## “God Really Does Love the World”

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



John 3:14-21

*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*

A pastor sent out a crowdsourcing question on social media to help with their sermon preparation asking: When you hear of the words John 3:16 what comes to mind?

Quite a few people replied offering all sorts of reflections and reactions.

Some talked about love. More specifically they talked about God’s love for us as individuals. They shared experiences of God’s love in deep, wondrous and intimate ways. Most mentioned experiencing this love at different decision points in their lives; at cross road moments, where their life could have gone two very different directions. But, because of God’s love at work in their lives, they journeyed down the better path.

Some talked about seeing John 3:16 posters at football games or other sporting events, or the moment someone realized that John 3:16 is printed on the bottom of every single In n’ Out cup.

A few people talked about the crises that they experienced in their life as they wondered deep down inside if they really believed in all of this enough in order to get to experience eternal life. The verse and its popular usage created this crisis of faith and soul wrenching anxiety.

Others talked about how the verse is used to create a very clear us vs. them dynamic, an insider vs. outsider, so they associate John 3:16 with judgement and exclusivity.

Reading through these responses, it was so fascinating to see the variety of different interpretations. All the ways people heard and digested these simple, inspired, beautiful and challenging words:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that any who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

It was really quite interesting for me to read through the various responses and reactions with our Lenten theme of Love God, Love creation in mind, because it created an opportunity for me to ask this question: what’s missing?

And the thing that no one mentioned was the world. Not one person talked about God’s overflowing love and creative life-giving power which set all things in motion and which is at work sustaining and redeeming all creation.

Not one single comment mentioned that it is so clear in this popular and well-known verse that “God so loved the world.”

Not just human beings, not just the human part of this planet, but all the parts of this world that we inhabit. God doesn’t just love us who were created in the image of God with all of our flaws and our virtues, with all of our big, beautiful and transcendent moments of grace and love, and all of our smaller moments of sin and self-centeredness. Of course, God surely loved and loves all of us human beings, but this verse speaks of a love that includes all of this and so much more: because God so loved the whole world.

It’s not surprising to me that we human beings have taken this verse from scripture which talks specifically about God’s love for the whole world and made it all about us. I know enough of us human beings, myself included, to know that this is basically our go to move.

But, throughout the history of our tradition this move has had some really negative side effects on how we view and engage in our understanding of the natural world. I think that we, as the church, need to repent for our part in theologically justifying a belief that the natural world is something that is here for our consumption, something that exists for us to profit from, something that was created for us to dominate, or at the very least it is something for us to escape from, because it is perishing, in hope for the paradise that is eternal life.

Now some of this is rooted in a version of the biblical story which I heard growing up. Now I want to say that this narrative developed over time by well-meaning people with good intentions, but at the same time there are some unintended theological consequences which arise from this story.

The story goes something like this, in the beginning God created all things and called them good. God created human beings in God’s image, Adam and Eve and gave them paradise. Eve was tricked into eating an apple this one time, and she messed everything up for everyone else generation upon generation.

As a consequence, human beings were kicked out of paradise, and it all just went downhill from there. It continued to get worse and worse for us until God sent God’s only son Jesus into the world. And because of all of the sin in the world, including your sin and my sin,

God needed a sacrifice to make things right. So Jesus was crucified because God required it, and because of this sacrifice, if we believe in this enough, we can manage all of the sin out of our lives, so when we die we go to heaven.

Like I said, this all comes from well-meaning Christians passed down and evolving slowly over time to become for me what I think when I hear: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that any who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

But the shadow side to all of this is that we Christians have sometimes come to view the world as something we need to get away from. We have used this narrative to place ourselves over and above the rest of God's created order. We have seen our redemption and salvation as something that happens only when we die and go to heaven, and therefore we don't really have to care for this earth and this creation because in the end it is all fading away.

And yet, God so loves the world.

So, I wonder if there is another narrative we might grasp onto. A narrative about a God who so loves the world. A God whose love is so overflowing and cosmic and abundant that it encompasses and encapsulates all of creation.

A love that is truly unconditional and infinite which is the creative life-giving engine that drives the universe; a God whose love is so transcendent and big and seemingly inconceivable that it can actually include everything and everyone that we have or will ever know.

And at the very same time, a God whose love is totally knowable, intimate, a love that knows you and knows me and calls us by name, a love that is close, so close that it is as close as the breath that you just took and of the one you are about to take.

It is this God of the universe, who in an act of overflowing love, spoke a word of light and life creating something wholly other than God. It is God who is divine self-giving love poured out for the sake of this world, weaving it together in this tapestry of holy goodness. After all things were ordered from chaos and brought into being God looked at it all and said, this is good, it is very good.

This same God created us from the dust of this earth in God's sacred and loving image. God breathed into us the breath of life itself, this quiet invisible life-giving force that surges through our bodies, this breath the essence of this sacred journey. Because God loves us and because love is always risky, God gave us the gift of life and freedom.

And because of this at points along the way we ignored, forgot or denied the love of God which always persists and insists on our behalf calling us back into whole living with each other and all creation. But we started to believe too much in ourselves and our ability, we started to build empires and structures and principalities, we started to trust too much in our own power and finally, we started to think that we could in fact save ourselves.

In the fullness of time, God emptied God's very self in an unbelievable act of self-giving love taking on human form in the mystery of the incarnation, God with us. God breathed this breath and walked this earth. God spoke and laughed and loved. God healed and called and commissioned. God proclaimed the good news of our sacred worth and the inherent goodness of all creation.

This God entered into all things and took all things, even death, onto God's self in an act of sacrificial love. In this act God broke the bonds of sin and death and showed us that humble life-giving love is the very essence of all existence and the force that undergirds the entire universe. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God proclaimed that this is our home and that our home is good, that all of this, you and me and all creation is worth redeeming.

We are called as followers in the way of Jesus to lives of wholeness and compassion. We are called to love God with everything that we have and all that we are. And we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Part of loving our neighbors means that we have to love our neighborhood.

We are called to cultivate a deep sense of groundedness on this good earth that God has created and given to us as a gift for us to tend and nurture. This world isn't something we need to escape or something that is here for us to profit from or to exploit. This earth is our home and our home is good.

I've been inspired by our community board which has been floating around our campus over these few weeks of Lent. You might have seen it as you were coming in for worship this morning. It's this big cool looking board with some recycled art made by one of our preschool classes on it. It asks us all one very simple question, what can you do today to love God and love creation?

A few weeks ago, it was out in our courtyard during preschool pick up. I picked up my daughter Olivia from school, and I asked if she wanted to look at the board with me. She ran over to the board and stared at it, before turning to ask me, "What are we supposed to do?"

I explained that we could find one thing we could do today to be kind to the earth. I asked her what she wanted to do today. She said "I want to take a bath with my sister Amelia, to save water." That night we talked about how we could do things to be kind to the earth as a way to pray to God, saying thank you for all the awesome gifts we have received in our life and offering ourselves in simple daily acts of self-giving to be part of God's healing work for all creation.

So friends, what can we do today to love this creation that God so deeply loves? What simple loving action can we take? It may not seem like a lot, it may not seem like we are able to accomplish much on our own. Luckily, it's not up to us alone, luckily our God can accomplish far more through us than we can ever hope or imagine. Because no act of love is ever wasted. Thanks be to God. Amen.