

14th March 2021

“God’s Tenacious Love”

Bible reading: John 3:13-21

Introduction:

The central verse in this passage is perhaps the best-known Bible verse in the world. John 3:16 shows up in all sorts of places. You might see a guy at a sporting event, holding up a sign that says on it, simply, “John 3:16.” You might see quarterback Tim Tebow with “John 3:16” written on his eye black. People figure that just the reference is enough to get their message across, since the verse, John 3:16, is so well known. “For God so loved the world...” has become emblematic of the central message of Christian faith.

The claim of this quotation is simple: God loves the world so much that he has sent his Son to live as one of us ... and if we believe in Jesus, we will have eternal life.

The message is modest and direct ... if we accept Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we will belong to God forever ... if we determine that we do not want anything to do with Christ, we will ultimately receive what we indicate is our desire v17. Judgment then is present in this statement, but so is the grace of God. God’s intention is not condemnation, but God will honour our choice. We have been created with freedom, of choice and that means, of course, that we can make bad choices.

We also believe in God’s tenacious love. Central to my understanding of Christianity is the assurance that God never gives up on any of us. We may give up on God ... like the Prodigal Son, we may wander off to some far country! We, may all but give up on ourselves, but God does not.

Marked in Baptism with the cross of Christ, we remain a child of God, no matter how big a mess we make of our lives. For at the end of the day, this is not a relationship we created, nor can we sustain it by our own accomplishments. God created this relationship, God maintains it, and our tenacious God will bring it to a desired conclusion.

Context:

Chapter 3 begins with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a rabbi, who comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. Maybe Rabbi Nic comes to Jesus at night to keep his conversation a secret from the other Pharisees. Maybe he doesn’t want to admit publicly that he is in contact with Jesus. Or maybe he was only trying to speak with Jesus when he had a better chance to spend some significant time in conversation, after the crowds have left for the day.

It’s pretty clear that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in a state of confusion and spiritual blindness, and he can’t seem to grasp what Jesus is trying to teach him. The conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus is focused on the idea of new birth, of being born both of flesh *and* of spirit. When Nicodemus leaves Jesus, we aren’t sure if he has decided to become a disciple or not. We won’t know that for several more chapters.

Our reading divides Jesus’ response to Nicodemus which begins in 3:11 and extends to 3:21, at verse 14. The passage begins with a play on the word “lift up.” It describes God’s command to Moses to lift up the serpent in the wilderness and the lifting up that is in store for Jesus. The passage makes little sense without the background story from Numbers 21:4-9. In that narrative, the people became “impatient” on their way. Still in the wilderness after their departure from Egypt, and despairing of being able to survive in a land with no food and water, they complained against God and Moses.

Consequently, terrible serpents appeared, bit the people, and killed them. When they repented, the Lord told Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten might look at it and live. The serpent was a mark of God's anger and God's mercy. God's people might be saved by the God of life, if only they would look upon the image of that which would have brought about their death.

To see the Son of Man lifted up calls for "belief" for the sake of eternal life, not simply a restoration of earthly life. God once saved the people by calling upon them to gaze on the serpent. Now, God would save the people by having them gaze in belief upon the Son, lifted up.

Kenneth Sauer, of the United Methodist church shared the story of his friend trying to get his six-year-old son to bed.

Upset that his father was putting him to bed earlier than he wanted to go, Benjamin said, "Daddy, I hate you." Benjamin's father replied, "Ben, I'm sorry you feel this way, but I love you." Benjamin's response to these gracious words surprised his dad: "Don't say that!" His father replied, "I'm sorry Benjamin, but it's true. I love you." "Don't" Benjamin protested, "Don't say that again!" At which point Ben's father said, "Benjamin, I love you...like it or not!"

And that is the way it is with God's love toward us: God loves us...like it or not!
What an extraordinary thing this is!

But this is exactly what our Gospel reading for this morning tells us: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..."* From the way the world often works, we might take it for granted that if God loves anyone, it will be those who love God; but Jesus doesn't say, "God so loved the Church," or "God so loved the faithful," or "God so loved the saintly." This good news is about God's deep and abiding love for the entire world.

And so we can say with confidence, "God so loved the atheist," "God so loved the murderer," "God so loved the arrogant," "God so loved the self-satisfied," "God so loved the bully"...and of course we can go on to include every single person who has ever lived.

I think sometimes we might do something, or be a certain way, that causes us to hate ourselves and therefore can't imagine...can't even get our head around the fact that God could ever possibly love us.

Think about the self-destructive activities we have been involved in:

- How easy it was for us to give into peer pressure in order to try and fit in...
- Think about all the dumb and sometimes terrible things we have done in order to try and impress our friends. Boy, we sure did use to hate ourselves!

It is very hard to accept unconditional love when we hate ourselves.

A young Uni student who was a new believer sat with an older woman who was in one of his classes, and attended the same Bible study. They got into a long conversation that day which eventually turned to God. And this woman, who believed in Jesus, loved God and went to church said to him point blank: *"I believe in heaven but, I will never be there. I'm not good enough."* Shocked, the Uni student asked her why?

It turned out that she had been abused by her father when she was a child. When she got older, she married a man who abused her as well and told her again and again how stupid she was, how worthless she was, how bad she was, and she believed him.

So, she could not, in her wildest dreams imagine herself being good enough to go to heaven. That long conversation turned into a VERY LONG all day conversation where they talked about grace and how we are all sinners, we have all fallen short of the Kingdom of God, but God loves each and every one of us no matter who we are, what we have done, what other people think or say about us or how we feel about ourselves. They talked and talked and talked. It was an amazing day.

- I wonder how many of the people who live in the homes around our church think they are not good enough for God to love them, die for them, save them?
- I wonder how many people we pass in the supermarket aisles, stand in line with, live next door to, think that they are not lovable enough to go to heaven?
- I wonder how many people think they are too sinful, have done too many terrible things in their past, have had too many bad thoughts that God couldn't possibly love them?

This kind of mindset not only stunts a person's ability to live in freedom, it can also contribute to mental illness, trigger depression and anxiety disorders.

I mean, after-all, if you don't think you are loved by God—what is the point?
If you don't think you could ever possibly go to heaven, where is the hope?

No wonder we have so much violence, anger, and political obsessions. *"God so loved the world..."* but how often does the world hear a different message?

Do you know God loves you; sins, flaws, warts and all? Do you really know it? Because knowing it changes everything. Guilt kills; grace brings new life.

Jesus says, *"whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life..."* And pay close attention to this part in v17: Jesus came into this world on a life-giving, life-saving mission. This is not a rejection mission. It's a rescue mission. It is the offer of life to all who are perishing. And we are all perishing.

We are all naturally going away from God, and face eternal separation from Him. But Jesus came to save us from this. But it appears to be true that not everyone who is dying wants to be saved, or trust the one who is offering salvation. Therefore, there is a judgment, a dividing line between those who accept the love of God who won't put their trust in Him. God will not force salvation on us.....He won't force the hand of those of us who opt out. There is a judgment, says Jesus. There is a condemnation, but it is not the judgment of God. God does not damn us.

The judgment occurs when we choose to hide from the light of God's sacrificial love.....choosing to stay in the darkness is self-condemnation. "This is the verdict," Jesus tells us starting in v19: *"Light has come into the world but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed."*

Eugene Peterson in the message which is a paraphrased NT in a "sense-for-sense" rather than a "word for word". Many of you probably have a copy. His paraphrase of John 3:19-20 is illuminating. It goes like this:

"This is the crises we are in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were really not interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, are addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and will not come near it..."

I can relate to that; how about you?

But going back to my original story: God loves you and me...like it or not!

And although we might run from God's love, God's light, that doesn't stop God from pursuing us. Because not only did Jesus come to die for us... God also is the one who comes to us and uses situations, other people, and even the devil's schemes to bring us to Himself.

It's the relentless pursuit of God's unconditional, unfathomable love for you and me—like it or not. And if we take the opportunity God offers us, and take God's hand—we will not go off the cliff. We will be saved. And God will never let go of our hand. He will guide us in the way we need to go in order for us to have life, and life to the abundance!

God will show us the way, He will guide us to our reason for living, He will give us the strength and the love to carry on and succeed. And when all is said and done, and this life comes to an end, God's hand will still be holding our hand. We will forever be in His presence, in His love that never ends. And this is the truth! And this is the kind of God we have.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”. V16-17

Conclusion:

Are you like Nicodemus? What keeps you in the dark, preventing you from turning toward the light? How do you try to keep your faith hidden, or separated from the other parts of your life? What assumptions do you hold onto, that prevent you from experiencing the peace that comes from confessing Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord, and trusting in his grace alone? What keeps you from naming Jesus as your Lord and being born anew of the Spirit?

Remember the rich young ruler who went away sorrowful because he had many possessions? We never know the end of his story, because the gospels never mention him again. But we do hear from Nicodemus again – twice.

The first time, he defends Jesus to the other Pharisees and priests, asking the other leaders to give Jesus a fair trial (7:50). The last time we see him, he is at the foot of the cross, with Joseph of Arimathea, taking down Jesus' broken body and preparing it for burial with an unusually large amount of spices, about “75 pounds”, v19:39. (that is a lot of spices, about 34kg)

Did he finally come into the light?

Did he eventually experience a spiritual birth?

I think so. I think his actions demonstrate an awakening to the light of belief in the Son of God. Nicodemus shows us that sometimes we don't get a struck-by-lightning experience. Sometimes, the process of claiming Jesus as Lord and Saviour takes a while. Some of us can't identify a single *moment* when we suddenly realize our salvation is secure, but we still claim Christ's grace, and we confess Jesus as our Lord.

Is Jesus calling you out of the darkness, into the light of his saving grace? Are you ready to make him Lord of your entire life, not just the part that you think of as “belonging to church”?

Are you ready to step out of the darkness, and into the light of God's love for you?

For God loved you in this way: he gave his only Son, so that if you believe in him, you will not perish but you will have eternal life.

Prayer