

Date: March 8, 2020

Scripture: John 3:1-17

Title: GOD'S LOVE JOHN 3:16

John 3:16 has had an effect on many people. That's why, even though our lesson from the Gospels for today is John 3:1-17, we're going to focus our attention on this one verse. Martin Luther called John 3:16, "the Gospel in Miniature." If all you had of the New Testament was this one verse, it would be enough to save your soul. "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."

We've heard this verse so often we're tempted to take it for granted. But have you ever thought what it would mean if you just changed one or two key words in this sentence? We could change the first noun. It could read like this: *For God so loved Israel*. That's what many of the Israelites believed. They believed because they were God's chosen people that meant that God loved them more than the other people of the earth. The prophets had to remind them that they were chosen to be a **light** to the other peoples and not that God loved them more. It says, *For God so loved the world ...* That's everybody, the rich, the poor, the beautiful, the ugly, the saint, the sinner. Or we could tinker with the second half of the verse: *For God so loved the world that He gave it a stern warning . . .* God gave many stern warnings in the Old Testament. But, the people still went **their** own way. Nothing really made a difference until, "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son . . ." How about if we just changed the last few words in the last half of the sentence? *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son to tell us how to be happy and comfortable in life*. That one sounds great! A lot more people would probably be won to Christianity if we made that last sentence our motto. But that's not how it reads either.

This morning we're going to spend some time with this little verse, John 3:16. Last week we kicked off the season of Lent by focusing on the goodness of God. If you understand God's goodness, you will trust God's plan. Today we're focusing on another aspect of God's character, God's Love. There's nothing in this entire universe that can compare with God's love.

When we compare human love, full of selfishness and pettiness and prejudice, to God's holy, sacrificial, unending love, we can see immediately that human love is often a counterfeit love: half of it's a pretty darn good reproduction, the rest is a fraud. How do we measure what real love is? John 3:16 is what real love is all about. "For God so loved the world . . ."

The verse begins by announcing that God loved us, all of us, even before we loved Him. It would be nice if it said that we first loved God. The truth of the matter is, that human beings are actually not very adept at this love business. We're well meaning,

but if there's one lesson from human history, it's that we can hate just as easily as we can love. We can even hate in the name of God, whose very nature is love.

There's another place in John's writing in which he says something profound about love. In 1st John 4:8 we read some powerful words, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." Then, in verse 10 John adds, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us . . ." Think about those words for a minute, "Whoever does not love does not know God . . ."

It always amazes me to discover how often people have hated in the name of God. They certainly can't justify that behavior in the New Testament. In I Corinthians 13 Paul wrote, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing . . ." (1-3)

Friend, this is what the Gospel is all about, LOVE. John says, "Whoever does not love does not know God." Why? "Because God is love." God is the measure of real love, and it's only by God's Spirit, that we're able to know and share real love.

God loved us before we were even capable of loving God in return. That's always a risk! Being the one who expresses love first. To put your heart out there and hope the other person feels the same way about you. But God didn't wait for us to love Him. God knew we would break His heart. God loved us, knowing full well, that we would never be able to return His love. God's love was truly unconditional.

A very compassionate woman named Rene Denfield adopted a little girl from the foster care system in her city. Three years later, a caseworker called and said she had another child Rene might be interested in. He was just a toddler, but he'd already suffered a great deal in his short life. The little boy named Tony had bounced from one foster home to another. His rage and his acting out were too much for other families to handle. But the caseworker believed Rene, who grew up in an abusive family herself, had the love and toughness to get through to this scared little boy.

The little fellow named Tony, was destructive, unpredictable and lashed out at everyone who tried to love him. As Rene wrote in an article for *The New York Times*, "When he raged, I told him I loved him. I told him over and over." Rene said it took years before Tony's rages subsided. But one day, he was playing on the floor when he looked up at Rene and said simply, "You brought me home. I love you too."

How long did Rene Denfield have to wait to hear those words? How many temper tantrums and destructive outbursts did she have to endure? It doesn't seem to matter. She was determined to love Tony forever, even if he could never love her back.

Notice that John 3:16 doesn't say, "For God so loved good people who loved God back." It says, "For God so loved the world. . ." No limitations, no exclusions, no

maybes, no fine print. Are you a part of this world? Then you are completely lovable in God's eyes. God loved us first. That's the first thing we need to see.

The second thing we need to see is: the verse tells us how much God loves us. God so loved us that He gave us His most precious gift, His Son.

It's easy to say, "I love you." People say it all the time. Sometimes they even mean it. But, it's a different thing, to put love into action.

John Robert Fox was an African-American artillery officer who served in the U.S. Army in World War II. In December 1944, he and his unit were assigned to patrol an area of Tuscany in Italy that had been overrun by Nazi soldiers. Fox and a handful of his men joined a small troop of Italian soldiers in a small Tuscan village. All the residents of that village had already fled. Fox and his small band of soldiers hid in an abandoned house in the village and reported to their fellow soldiers back in base camp on the movement of Nazi troops through the town.

Imagine the surprise of Fox's fellow soldiers at the base camp when he radioed a set of bombing coordinates to them and ordered them to begin shelling a certain neighborhood in that village. Here's why they were surprised: the coordinates were very close to where Fox and his men were hiding! The gunner who received the order deliberately changed the coordinates slightly to protect the American soldiers.

A second time, Fox radioed in and ordered the gunner to bomb the coordinates he had sent them. The gunner argued with Fox. It was too close to his hiding place. He was putting himself and his men in danger.

Fox radioed back a third time. He made it clear to the gunner that he knew what he was doing. The house they were hiding in was surrounded by Nazi soldiers. John Robert Fox's last words were, "Fire it. There's more of them than there are us." Fox and his men were laying down their own lives to defeat the Nazi troops. The gunner ordered the bombing strike. More than 100 Nazi soldiers were killed in the strike, along with Fox and his men. Their sacrifice gave the American troops time to re-group and launch a successful counterattack. The Allied troops regained the village and drove out the Nazi forces. In 1997, John Robert Fox was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his "gallant and courageous actions, at the supreme sacrifice of his own life."

There is NO greater LOVE, than to give up your own life to ensure that others could live! God loved us first. God loved us, that He gave His one and only Son. But why did He give His Son? You know the answer: "That whosoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life."

Do you believe in God? I mean, really believe in God? Would you be willing to give your life for him, as he did for you? As we said earlier, it's easy to say "I love you," it's another, to put love in action.

Let me tell you one more true story. Alfred Vanderbilt was the great grandson of billionaire businessman Cornelius Vanderbilt. There was nothing particularly

praiseworthy about how Alfred lived his life. He used his massive inheritance to invest in real estate and horses, and to throw lavish parties. But here's why we remember Alfred Vanderbilt.

In 1915, he set sail on the British ocean liner the Lusitania heading toward London. At the time, Europe was embroiled in World War I, but nobody thought that enemy troops would attack a civilian ship. Sadly, they were wrong. German U-boats attacked the Lusitania as it sailed off the coast of Ireland.

As a First Class passenger, Vanderbilt was guaranteed a lifejacket and a seat on one of the first lifeboats leaving the ship. But, Alfred Vanderbilt refused his rights. He gave away his lifejacket and his seat on the lifeboat. As the ship slowly sank into the water, Alfred Vanderbilt focused on getting as many children into the lifeboats as possible. He died saving others. A *New York Times* journalist described his last moments as "gallantry which no words of mine can describe."

How do you describe a love that's unearned, undeserved, given freely and generously and sacrificially for the sake of everyone, whether they can ever return that love or not? That's God's love. God had a million reasons to condemn the world. But He didn't. God saved the world by giving the absolute greatest gift He could give. And God made us a promise that whoever believes, yes, *whoever* believes in God's Son, Jesus Christ, will not perish but have eternal life. Have you accepted that promise in your own life? If so, Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.