

John 3:14-21
March 14, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Sometimes the most well-known words of scripture can be the most challenging to preach on. They have been heard so often, engrained into our mind, memorized, and recited, and we ponder what else can be said about a given text one has not heard already. The sixteenth verse of the third chapter of John falls into that category. Our small group that gathers each Monday to discuss the upcoming gospel passage concurred. Someone pointed out they had to memorize it in confirmation. I suspect if asked to recite it, a vast majority of you could do so. I have seen bracelets engraved with that verse and a shirt or two over the years with John 3:16 adorning it. Another could still recall the image of that one person holding a sign in the sea of fans at a football game that had imprinted on it in big, bold writing, “John 3:16.”



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In some ways, it seems like our Christology hinges upon these words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” It is the foundational verse many Christians base their understanding of who God is and why the Word became flesh. Myself included as on our website, my bio includes reference to the importance of John

3:16 in how it shapes and guides my faith. Do not get me wrong, if one is going to pick a verse that comes directly from Jesus, this is pretty darn good one to choose. It is steeped in love and not for just some, but for all the “world”; even opposed to the will of God, which John’s use of the word “world” most often refers to. Those who remain in the darkness unto which the light enters to shine the light of the gospel, that is the good news of Jesus Christ.

Yet, why stop at John 3:16? Why is John 3:17 so often left out of the equation? Not on the proverbial list of verses to memorize or on signs at a sporting event. Do we inadvertently deem it not as important by not including it?

Don’t you hate it when something gets caught in a drawer and you just cannot open it? It is an annoyance and frustration. At times it is an easy fix; but other times you really have to work and work to pry whatever it is free to get at whatever it was you needed in that drawer. I had a toolbox a little like that. There was a lid that opened and 3 drawers below it that pulled out. The challenge was that you could not open all 3 drawers simultaneously and only one at a time. You also had to have the lid open for the drawer to pull out. I would like to have a conversation with whoever thought that was a good idea. The number of times I tried to open two drawers at one time or one drawer without the lid being open. It got to a point I would just leave the lid open and one drawer slightly pulled out. It seems rather silly, maybe even a bit lazy, but I even arranged items, so those most frequently used were in those two spots. In time, I forgot what was even in those 2 other drawers. In fact, I can remember hunting and hunting for a stud finder at one time and lo and behold there it was in one of those two drawers.

Maybe John 3:17 gets relegated to that 2nd or 3rd drawer at times. Yet, in all reality it belongs right up there in those 2 spots open and used all the time. That 17th verse says something just as equally important about God as the 16th. It further expands upon the love of God highlighted in the well-known verse that precedes it. Something we may often forget; even, when we have dwelt our whole life in the concept of grace that is free and unconditional. Hear those words again, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world.” Jesus came not to condemn, but to save.

Yet today, so many continue to deem themselves unworthy of the saving grace of Jesus Christ or fall prey to thinking God is angry at them or out to condemn them. I have been there myself. Luther found himself in a similar situation. This view that God is out to get us leads to a relationship with God that often leads to one burdened by the weight of guilt and shame rather than the new life and the new freedom we have in Christ. It is the eternal life Jesus speaks of in verse 15. The gift we have received through his death and subsequent resurrection. Eternal life in John is not always equated with everlasting life beyond our worldly bodies but is the gift of living as a child of God. It begins now living in the light of Christ that has set us free from the bondage of sin. Jesus came not to condemn, but he came to save. This is the love God for the world in giving and sending the Son.

The Reverend Will Willimon, in a sermon on this passage, writes:

Lent is historically a time for repentance and confession of sin. There are at least two ways to be honest about our sin. One way is for you to feel condemned in your wrongdoing. You are threatened. You are caught red-handed in your sin. Your error is undeniable. Don't lie about it, or there will be consequences. You had better confess your wrong, or you will be punished.

There's another way, and I think that is true of this Sunday's gospel. You realize that God is not your enemy. Something happens in your life whereby your eyes are opened: you sense how deep and pervasive is God's love for you. Having that knowledge, being secure in your relationship with God, you are thereby free to tell the truth about yourself. You are honestly confessing your sin, not fearing threats but out of love.

Surely you parents know this. I'm sure that you children do. When a parent is deeply concerned about the direction a child is taking in life, one way of handling it is to set the child down and to condemn in the strongest possible words the child's behavior. Perhaps, through harsh talk, the parent can intimidate the child to such a degree that the child will change his or her ways.

There's another way. That's for the parent to sit the child down and to say how much the parent loves the child, how much the parent believes in the child, and how confident the parent is that the child has been given the resources to live differently. The parent may stress the child's preciousness, the gifts that God has given to the child, the child's trajectory as a betrayal of those good gifts. And then the parent reassures the child that, no matter what, the child can never do anything that will stop the parent from loving child.

I believe [Willimon further writes] the second way, the "no condemnation" way, is probably the more effective. At least I think it is more closely aligned with the way of God the Father.

No condemnation.ⁱ

While John 3:16 indeed is life-giving in its own right; if we open that often-used drawer and reveal the words of John 3:17 the light of Christ shines a bit brighter into those cracks of condemnation we place upon ourselves. The light of Christ fills those cracks and allows us to hear, believe and trust in the words, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world ... but in order that the world might be saved through him." To fully abide in the love of God and the gift of God's Son. Verse 17 is every bit as freeing as verse 16. For as Willimon concludes when we come to this realization, no condemnation, "we don't have to put on the masks and try to be somebody we are not. We don't have to act some fake role that's not us. We just have to be ourselves, namely, those who are loved, forgiven by God. ... For the first time we are free to tell the truth about ourselves. We're not the people we wish were. We have failed to live up to God's expectations for us. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not done right even when we know right. We can be so honest because we heard these marvelous words. "Not do condemn...but to save."ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Will Willimon; *Will Willimon's Pulpit Resource* January, February, March 2021 Vol. 49, No. 1, Year B; Copyright 2020 by William H. Willimon; Abingdon Press; p.34.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.