

## **God's greatest gift**

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John 3:14-21

Is there any better known verse from the Gospel of John than 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Most however stop with just the first half, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son" and then we have somehow added a lot of baggage that was never there in the passage.

Thanks to Augustine we have the concept of original sin and that somehow we had become so bad and evil because of Adam and Eve that God hated us and the only way to change God's mind, to make God love us was for a blood sacrifice to be offered in the form of Jesus' crucifixion. That my friends isn't anywhere to be found in this passage.

The problem as always is in pulling verse out of context and reducing John's incredible gospel to a slogan. Religion by slogan just does not work and sends most people running for the nearest exit. A major challenge with using John's gospel on Sunday mornings is that we can only take small sections. This always pulls the passage out of context to some extent. So to begin with I want to set this passage back into the context of the larger gospel.

This passage is the teaching portion of the scene with Nicodemus. The passage begins with Nicodemus coming at night to speak with Jesus. Jesus talks with him about being born again (another of those passages which gets taken out of context) and then Jesus turns to the crowd that apparently is in the room or wherever he is teaching. Nicodemus moves into the background and Jesus is now speaking to a group of people, maybe the disciples, the audience is not clear, but that he is speaking to a group is clear from the Greek he uses. Jesus is answering the questions of Nicodemus, but we do not realize that because the passage is taken out of context.

The other context is that Jesus places his teaching in the world. Kosmos (kosmos) is the Greek and this means the entire world especially in this context the sinful, thoroughly human part of the world. This message is addressed not just to a Jewish audience but the entire world. By the time this gospel was written John's community had been expelled from their Jewish world. They were definitely outsiders now. The price for believing had definitely gone up.

So where do we go from here. Let's start with something Richard Rohr teaches, "Jesus was not God's Plan B. Jesus is Plan A." This in my theological thinking is a critical point and may be the most important thought I have gained in all of the Richard Rohr that I have read. Last year during Lent we watched a series of

videos by Richard about what he calls his alternate orthodoxy. At the heart is this idea that Jesus is not a reaction to failure but part of God's plan all along. The difference is that by making Jesus God's Plan A we change the whole dynamic of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. As Plan A all of Jesus' life becomes part of the saving act, not just the crucifixion.

Listen to the Message translation: "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. <sup>17</sup> God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.

Please look at this through a new lens. That of a loving God who does not demand a blood sacrifice so that he can love us again. God never stopped loving us at any point in history. We may have thought that, but the God I believe in, that I and others preach is one of unlimited love, compassion and forgiveness. Jesus was made incarnate by the Virgin Mary as we say in the Nicene Creed to bring that message to us. We were and are the ones who need to have our minds changed about God.

This is at the heart of Fr. Richard's teaching that God sent Jesus, his beloved son, not to change God's mind about humanity, but to change our minds about God. God wanted us to move out of that temple mindset I talked about last week. That was one of a God that had to be appeased by sacrifice. That is the table the really important table that Jesus turned over last week. The model of sacrifice to appease God is over with Jesus. Why, because God does not desire our sacrifices. You can even find that in several Psalms and those date back all the way to King David!

This idea of God's unending love and the willingness to turn evil to good is a constant thread of scripture from the beginning. God not only loved the world in Christ's time, but loved the world from the beginning of creation. I am currently working on memorizing Genesis 1 for the Easter Vigil. A constant refrain is "and God saw it was good." Creation is inherently good including humanity. Augustine put an interpretation of the fall of man into the Garden of Eden story that simply isn't there is you talk to a Jewish theologian. Jewish theologians teach that when Adam and Eve eat the apple and gain the knowledge of good and evil that is in fact the completion of the creation story. Only by knowing the difference is humanity ready to go out into the world to be fruitful and multiply.

In the great reversal of the cross God and Jesus take the absolute worst of us and turns it into our salvation and not just for us for the entire world. Yet we have so much trouble believing this. I cannot tell you how many people I speak to who don't believe God loves them.

One of the things I did while walking the Camino was engage people in conversation about their faith or to be honest their lack of faith. Time and time again I heard the litany of how bad we are and so many who wanted God to love them, but didn't think they were worthy or good enough. To be honest church over the centuries has done a great job of reinforcing that thought.

I have been enjoying a series of videos that I have been posting on the church Facebook page from the Society of St. John the Evangelist. The theme is meeting Jesus through the gospel of John. Early this week Br. Johathan Maury said: *"I am certain that you, as I have, have found times where I was reluctant or even refusing to accept and receive the overpowering love of God poured out on me in Jesus Christ. There've been many times where I felt completely unworthy of the love which brought me into being, saved me, and promises me, even now, eternal life. And yet, that is what the befriending of God in Jesus is about. It is about that extravagant love, that self-offering by which God draws us into union with God's own Self."*<sup>1</sup>

Do you hear the difference in this theology from one of Jesus' atonement for our sins by suffering to appease God? This "extravagant love, that self-offering by which God draws us into union with God." This is not the action of an angry God, but for centuries God has been portrayed as angry. My hope is as you wrestle with this concept that may be very different from what you were taught. That you like Brother Jonathan might just be willing to accept that you are loved that you are a beloved disciple. Risk putting down that burden of shame and guilt the church may have placed upon you and as Easter approaches you to can truly and completely know the love of God. The God who so loved the world that he gave his son so save us.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNdEI5\\_7p70&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNdEI5_7p70&feature=youtu.be)