



Sunday May 26, 2024
John 3:1-17 (Trinity Sunday)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Have you ever memorized a Bible verse? One that you can quote, chapter and verse from memory? There are plenty of great verses to choose from. I think many of you could probably recite the first few words of Psalm 23: *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...”* Or maybe you know one of my favorite verses from Philippians 4: *“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Or perhaps you can quote the very first verse of the Bible in Genesis 1: *“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth...”*

Or maybe you know the popular verse from 1 Corinthians 13 that’s often read at weddings: *“Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”*

These are some of the most well-known Bible verses, and maybe you know many or all of them by heart. But I suspect, if I put you on the spot and asked you to recite *any* verse from the Bible, you’d probably choose *this* one: *“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.”* John 3:16. Out of *all* the famous, memorable, quotable Bible verses, this one might just be the most recognizable.

Martin Luther referred to John 3:16 as “The Gospel in a Nutshell” and in some circles, John 3:16 has become a slogan of sorts for the Christian faith. People carry signs and posters to sporting events that read “John 3:16”. Professional athletes write it on their shoes. Others have a “John 3:16” bumper sticker on their car. The fast-food chain In’N’Out burger prints “John 3:16” on the bottom of their cups. And it appears on countless bracelets and t-shirts. This verse is *so famous* everyone seems to know what it means.

Or do they? Most people, I think at least most Christians know what John 3:16 *says*, but I’m not so sure everyone knows what it *means*? John 3:16 says, *“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.”* For many Christians who put “John 3:16” on billboards and bumper stickers and signs at sporting events, I think this verse is meant as a warning – or maybe even a threat. The emphasis is placed on the part that says *“so that everyone who believes in him.”* In other words: *“You’d better believe in Jesus, or else.”*

Karoline Lewis, a Bible scholar and gospel of John expert says, *“In our common vernacular, John 3:16 has become that which justifies damnation of unbelievers... Yes, God will save you if you believe in Jesus. But if you don’t? Not so much.”*

This is what happens when we take famous Bible verses or any Bible verses for that matter and remove them from their original context. When we read John 3:16 by itself, it sounds like a theological formula for salvation. Believe in Jesus; get eternal life. Don’t believe in Jesus, and you will perish.

But John 3:16 doesn’t exist in a bubble. And we can’t read John 3:16 without also reading John 3:17. I wonder how many of you know John 3:17 by heart? Let me tell you – it’s worth memorizing and it goes like this: *“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.”*

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world – and yet, that’s exactly what so many use John 3:16 to do. Too many Christians use John 3:16 to condemn those who don’t believe in Jesus – or don’t believe in Jesus the “right” way. **God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world.**



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No, God sent the Son into the world in order that the world might be saved through him. Notice that it doesn't say "in order that believers might be saved" or "in order that the baptized might be saved" or "in order that regular church attenders might be saved." God's intention was to save the whole world. All of it. All of us.

John 3:16 *needs* John 3:17. These verses need to be read together and read in context. Listen again to John 3:16 and 17: "*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.*"

God loved the world – God *loves* the world – so much so that God sent the Son to bring salvation to the *whole world*. Not to condemn, not to punish, but in order that the world might be saved. If you're going to use John 3 to come up with a theory of salvation, the conclusion you come to should be "God saves the whole world" and *not* "Only believers can be saved." But even then, we might be missing the context of these verses. Because ultimately, I don't think John 3:16 and 17 can be used to make an abstract theological argument, at least not without considering some particulars, too.

What I mean by this is: Jesus, or the gospel writer, says these words in response to a particular conversation, between Jesus and Nicodemus the Pharisee. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness, trying to understand who Jesus is and what Jesus represents. Jesus tells him, "*No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*" And Nicodemus doesn't get it. He doesn't understand what Jesus means, he gets stuck on the idea of a grown adult crawling back into the womb and being born again. Jesus seems to get annoyed: "*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*"

But here's the thing. God *so loved* Nicodemus the Pharisee – the Pharisee who didn't understand. God so loved the world – that God sent the Son. There's a universal truth here that must not be overlooked. John 3:16 and 17 make a powerful theological statement. But theology can't be arbitrarily separated. It's specific and particular. Our faith can't be separated from our real lives. When we say, "God so loved the world," we're not just talking about something abstract.

God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, in order that the world might be saved through him. God so loved the whole world – loved the Pharisee who questioned Jesus in the dark of night, loved the Samaritan woman who questioned Jesus at the well, loved the man paralyzed his entire life, loved the man blind from birth, loved Jesus' friend Lazarus who lay dead in the tomb for four days, and loved Peter who denied and Judas who betrayed.

God so loves the whole world – loves you, sitting here in this church or watching online today. Loves your family, your friends, and your neighbors. Loves the people who used to come to church but don't anymore. Loves the people who were hurt by the church or lost their faith. Loves the people who have never stepped inside a church. Loves the people who are hungry, and the people who feed the hungry, and the people who don't care about the hungry as much as they should. Loves our brothers and sisters who are Jewish, Muslim, Republican, Democrat, gay, straight, citizen, immigrant, and not because they accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. **God loves all of us.**

My friends, this isn't just some abstract theological concept. This is personal, individual, real, concrete. Jesus Christ lived and died because God loves you. Because God loves your next-door-neighbor, and your worst enemy, and all the people you'll never have a chance to meet.

When we quote John 3:16 and 17, when we recite the words "*God so loved the world,*" we need to remember that it's personal, and it's universal. God loves you – God loves me – God loves the whole world – and God saves all of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.