

A Lent 2 2017 John 3:16-17

Ruthie and I went to the Family Christian Store this week. You probably know that it is closing. Most things are 60% off. We were hoping to find some things for confirmation and Sunday school. Everything we needed was sold out.

So we wandered around the store to see if there was anything we couldn't live without.

I spent most of my time in the home décor section.

Mostly what was left were plaques, picture frames, mugs, plates, trays, all with selected Bible verses on them:

Be still and know that I am God. (Ps 46:10)

Fear not for I am with you always. (Is 41:10)

Strong and Courageous (1 Corinthians 16:13)

*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord
(Joshua 24:15)*

Some were not actually Biblical

Pray more; worry less

God's way or the highway

Cupcakes and Jesus??????

You can get a whole matching kitchen set: canisters, salt and pepper shakers, utensil holders, tray mugs etc. Which said *Season with Love.*

So what if these tidbits of faith were all you knew about God.

Would it be enough? Or do they miss the point
Can they deepen our faith? Or do they limit our understanding.

A famous preacher and writer, Dr. Fred Craddock, often described the tendency for us humans to try to shrink the Christian faith to a manageable size.

It makes me think of getting ready for Guatemala and working hard to get as many gifts down to our families as possible and so we stuffed the quilts and shoes and books into those plastic bags and used the vacuum to suck all of the air out. A whole table of stuff became a tiny little package, which of course made it easier to carry but that bag had no value until we opened it up and unpacked it.

I think that this morning's gospel, especially John 3:16 is a little like that.

It is so familiar, so simple and easy to put on jewelry or a banner or t-shirt that we might just begin to think that if we know John 3:16, we know all there is to know about God's love.

I saw a bumper sticker that said, when you've said John 3:16, you've said it all.

So what do you think?

Is John 3:16 enough?

Well there is a case to be made for that.

I have always be tempted to get up some Sunday morning, climb into the pulpit and say:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but may have everlasting life. This is the good news of the gospel.

And then sit down.

Martin Luther called this verse, “the little Bible.” And in another place, “The entire Gospel in miniature.”

It is a favorite for most people. It can be used for Christmas Sermons, Easter sermons, weddings, funerals, baptisms and confirmations.

The problem is that when 2 people say the same thing, they don't necessarily mean the same thing.

For some, John 3:16 is like the comfort of a warm blanket and an expression of God's unlimited grace and love.

For others it is like a shaking finger that sends those outside a particular brand of faith to hell.

It can be used to destroy hope.

Like the vacuum bags we need to unpack it.

Karoline Lewis wrote in Dear Working Preacher (3/9/17) that too many well-meaning Christians think something like “*Yes, God will save you if you believe in Jesus. But if you don't? Not so much.*” In other words, this passage has wrongly been used as a prescription for how to win salvation.

But Lewis argues that John 3:16 is not a theory of salvation. Rather it is a statement about the extent of God's love.

In today's gospel, Nicodemus gets it wrong, yet Jesus concludes his conversation with him by declaring that God loves the world (including therefore Nicodemus) and then goes on to add verse 17, which makes the extent of God's love clear:

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.

This is the message of John's gospel and over the next few weeks in our gospel lessons we will see Jesus push the boundaries of God's love, and in so doing people's lives are changed. Sometimes the world is changed!

And sometimes in ways people thought impossible.

It is the same today, God's love can transform us and the world. In closing I ask you to join me in a litany.

I am going to lift up people and situations that desperately need God's love. And your response will be “Go so loved the world.” (Idea: Homiletic-on-line Feb. 28, 1999)

- For those who believe they cannot face another day of life, **God so loved the world.**
- For those who struggle to get their addiction under control, **God so loved the world.**
- For those who ache with loneliness, **God so loved the world.**
- For those living below the poverty line, **God so loved the world.**
- For those fearful of deportation, and for all who lack security, **God so loved the world.**
- For those who are hurt by racism or sexism, prejudice and hatred, **God so loved the world.**
- For our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters who risk violence when attending worship or school, **God so loved the world.**
- For you and me and all God's people and for the whole cosmos, **God so loved the world.**

For god so loved the world...don't put it on a plaque, but rather lay it on your heart because this is the good news of the gospel. Amen