

I struggled with the sermon this week. No one ever likes to talk about venomous snakes (I'd much prefer images of manna, and burning bushes) and I really don't like talking about John 3:16.

I had to spend sometime this week asking myself why I am so bothered by this Gospel reading. I realized quite quickly that my ire came from a perceived lack of understanding and the blatant commercialization of one line of our whole gospel message. Children memorize it in Sunday school, the Gideons traditionally have placed this verse on the front page of their Bibles (usually printing it in dozens of languages), and missionaries often use it as the starting point for evangelism.

Out of curiosity, I typed the phrase "John 3:16" into the Google Internet search engine and in .71 seconds I was given 65,600,000 results. Now many of the top hits were bible translations and commentaries but I didn't have to look very far before I found the 3:16 Etsy Store, the "3:16 Collection" (a faith based clothing design company); the 43 3:16 phone case with matching hoodie, stickers, ball caps, ties, golf clubs and if you go to Amazon you will find over 2000 books all referencing 3:16.

I can't help but ask if motivations for John 3:16 being one's favorite Bible verse might be somewhat questionable. Does it hang on a wall, appear on a plaque, fly across computer monitors as a screen saver because people really believe God loves the whole world? Or because they appreciate frequent reminders that they are saved while others are not? Is John 3:16 in peril of losing its voice of promise because rather than being a claim of assurance it's used as an injunction for judgment? Because rather than being a statement about God's love for the world it's a threat for those unwilling to accept God's love? Because rather

than heard as an invitation to participate in spreading God's love it's a summons to exclude those we think God does not love?

To say the least, it's unfortunate when Bible verses are taken out of context.

John 3:16 is first a word to Nicodemus. And Nicodemus, a man, a Pharisee, a leader used to privilege and entitlement needs to hear that God loves the world. And so do the disciples, which is why in the very next chapter Jesus then takes them to the world, to a small town in Sychar, Samaria, so that they can meet *who* the world is (the story of the woman at the well). Because the world may very well be the last place — and the last person — on earth we think God would love.

John 3:16 is probably the most well known scripture verse. It is a favorite of many, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life". Although I don't think it is complete without the next verse, "For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

But we have heard it so often that we forget how profound it is. We have recited it so often that we have failed to see the power in it. We have become so familiar with it that we no longer listen to it. Like the refined sugar in my diet, we have become so accustomed to it that we miss the point of it.

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. (Jn. 3:16-17)

I know I'm guilty, but I do try to not use "church words" in my sermons. I try to speak using language familiar to all of us – and to define words that are not commonly used outside of the church. The other extreme, in my mind, are the signs that frequently show up at sporting events with the simple message: "John 3:16."

For me and probably for you, that sign makes perfect sense. For people of faith, that message is clear.

But what about the people who have never read the Bible? What about the people that I assume the message is trying to reach? They haven't a clue about its meaning. In the end, a simple sign with a profound message is only "preaching to the choir." It uses insider language to speak to insiders about a story that is intended for outsiders.

John 3:16, speaks powerful good news. John 3:17 offers a new way of understanding what God is about. And believe it or not, it's true.

I read a story this week of an encounter between a father and his then six-year-old son. Upset that his father was putting him to bed earlier than he wanted to go, Benjamin (the child) said, "Daddy, I hate you." Benjamin's father, exercising the kind of parental wisdom I hope for, replied, "Ben, I'm sorry you feel that way, but I love you." Benjamin's response to such gracious words surprised his dad: "Don't say that!"

"I'm sorry Benjamin, but it's true. I love you." "Don't," his son protested, "Don't say that again!" At which point Ben's father, remembering the words of this bible passage, said, "Benjamin, I love you...*like it or not!*"

Why was Benjamin protesting his father's love? Because he realized he could not control his father's love and twist it to his advantage. Indeed, in the face of such love there is no bargaining and, ultimately, no control whatsoever. If his dad had said that if he ate all his vegetables he could stay up, or agreed that Ben could stay up later this night if he went to bed earlier the next, then Benjamin would have been a player, he would have exercised some measure of control over the situation and, indeed, over his dad. But in the face of unconditional love we are powerless. Yes, perhaps we can choose to accept it or not, perhaps we can run away from it, but we cannot influence it, manipulate it, or control it. In the face of this kind of love, we are powerless. And only when we've let go of all of our delusions of actually being in control do we realize that such loss of perceived freedom and power is actually life.

Our text for today reminds us that God prefers to use the language of love over any other destructive language. God chooses to speak of reconciliation and offers the gift of eternal life. Believe it or not, God – the All-Powerful One – chooses not to exert power over us. God – who is pure and holy – chooses not to require us to become holy before hearing us or coming to us. God uses the vulnerability of love to invite us into a new way of living.

It's as simple as that. Believe it or not.

The problem is we have been taught there is no such thing as a free lunch. We begin with the assumption that we must do something in order to deserve God's love. We act as if there is something we must do to deserve the free gift that God is offering to us.

Too many of us have accepted a "free gift" in the past only to find out that there was a catch. The "free meal" included a sales pitch. We have seen too many "buy one get one free" to believe that God could offer us the promise of eternal life as a free gift with no strings attached.

We think there must be a catch. So we find it hard to believe that God would find a way to pay the price for us.

But the truth is:

"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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

(Jn. 3:16-17)

Believe it or not, it's true. For you, for me, for the writers of the 2000+ books, the designers and makers of the 65 Million+ products, for the homeless, the forgotten, the vulnerable and the forsaken.

And for this truth, we should be thankful. Amen.