

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
March 18, 2012~~Lent 4
John 3:14-21

"For God so loved the world..."

Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.

Fill the hearts of your faithful,

and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.

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

Everyone take a deep breath. We are tackling John 3:16.

...one of the most famous verses in the Bible;

...one of the most widely quoted verses in the Bible;

...a passage sometimes called the "Gospel in a nutshell;"

...a passage author Max Lucado calls "an alphabet of grace, a table of contents to Christian hope, each word a safe-deposit box of jewels."

John 3:16 has become so popular that it is now displayed in unexpected places and in unexpected ways...it serves as a code, a way of indicating: "I am a Christian, a true believer-that is what I am signaling to you."

This one Bible verse, John 3:16, has become ubiquitous in our society. Who would have guessed? Quarterback Tim Tebow, of the Denver Broncos fame, printed John 3:16 on his eye black (until that was banned by the NFL).

Spectators display John 3:16 in large letters at sporting events so that their poster, caught by the TV camera, will be blasted to millions of fans watching at home.

The California hamburger chain "In-N-Out Burger" prints "John 3:16" on the inside bottom rim of their paper cups. Tornado Fuel Saver prints "John 3:16" on their box. And the low-cost clothing store chain "Forever 21" prints "John 3:16" on the bottom of their bright yellow shopping bags. According to Forever 21, the inscription is "a demonstration of the owner's faith."

John 3:16 has also been used as a song title by various artists, including Wyclef Jean and DJ Muggs, the Method Man, and Katie Jane Garside.

John 3:16 may be popping up everywhere but it is not MY first choice for a Bible verse to rise to such popularity and garnish so much attention. It is an important passage, but I would rather have people memorize, for example,
Micah 6:8

...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice,

and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Or maybe Amos 5:24

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteous like an ever-flowing stream.

Or maybe Romans 8:38-39

...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,
nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us
from the love of God...

Okay, I will stop quoting my favorite Bible verses. Let's return to John 3:16.

The reason I am cautious about viewing this passage as "the Gospel in a nutshell" or "an alphabet of grace, a table of contents to Christian hope" is that I am not sure Jesus would have approved. The passage implies that you have to believe in Jesus to NOT perish and to have eternal life, and I think Jesus' ministry was expansive and all inclusive. I think Jesus offered hope, grace and even salvation to EVERYONE, even those who did not follow him.

When I study Jesus' life I see him including women and Gentiles, children and sick people, those possessed by demons and those considered unclean,

unfit and

unholy in his ministry. It seems like the farther out there you are, the more Jesus was interested in loving you and praying for you.

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." Matthew 5:43-44

That seems so consistent with Jesus' message. He often makes love the basis of faith, the kingdom of God, and salvation. I think John 3:16 runs the risk of interpreting Jesus' message as too small and too exclusive.

I do think you will not perish and have eternal life if you follow Jesus...or if you follow Buddha, Krishna, Muhammad, or Bahauallah. I think if Jesus were still here on earth he would say of course Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Baha'is can and will have eternal life, I just want them to be close to God however they understand and experience God.

Tim Tebow and others find that John 3:16 sums up their faith just fine but for me it is too limited and when I hear it I cannot help but wonder what Jesus himself would say about the passage.

Let's remember who wrote this passage. The Gospel of John was the 4th and last Gospel to be written. It was not written by the disciple John, it couldn't have been. The Gospel was written in 90 CE which is over 50 years after Jesus' death. With the average life span among peasants in the ancient world being just 42 years, the disciple John who actually knew Jesus was long dead when the Gospel of John was written. The Gospel was written by members of the Johannine community who simply used John's name.

The Gospel of John is noted for its very high Christology-meaning the writers were far more interested in the risen Christ than the historical Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels-Matthew, Mark and Luke-speak much more about the Jesus movement, about the man who walked on earth, preached, touched people with his hands, healed and prayed and dined with sinners.

The Johannine community wrote a Gospel that is thin on Jesus' parables and healings and heavy on Jesus as the incarnation of the divine, Jesus as the object of veneration, Jesus as offering salvation for believers.

And so I worry about making John 3:16 into a fetish, a litmus test of one's faith, a sign that unless you can quote it and you believe it you are not a true Christian.

For me, it is actually the first six words of John 3:16 that hold the real nugget of truth. I think the first six words ARE some of the most important words in the Bible....for God so loved the world...maybe those six words should be called "the Gospel in a nutshell." Those six words are worth memorizing and quoting. God so loved the world, and God so loves the world still.

God so loves the world and all of Creation, sparrows and sharks, gazelles and geese, hippos and humans, Black Oaks and Black Widow Spiders.

God so loves the world.

Those are important and moving words....God so loves the world. I hold onto

those words because I experience God as so loving the world and so loving me
and so loving all of us. Even when we fail. Even when we are creepy.
Even
when we have meltdowns. God so loves the world and all of us in it.

My feelings about how God so loves the world are summed up by Derek Tidball
in his book *The Message of the Cross*....listen to his words...

Love is not a quality that God possesses, but the essence of God himself.

It is not a minor attribute that characterizes God on occasions, but the very heart of God, his essential being. It is not a component part of God, but his very nature. Before God is anything else, he is love.

God being the essence of love matters more to me than whether one has to believe in Jesus to be saved, and even more than whether God gave his only son to the world. Maybe this very famous passage, John 3:16 is also an invitation to struggle a bit with the Trinity. I do believe that God came and walked among us. But I do not believe that parents send children toward pain, into harm's way....I think that when danger lies ahead, parents go first, they go themselves. Maybe for a moment the separation of Father God and son Jesus does not serve us.

The Quaker scholar Elton Trueblood talked about Jesus and God in this way:
"The historic Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that. It means that God is like Jesus." If God is like Jesus then we know a lot about God. Jesus was all about love and justice. God came to us in human form.
Maybe

to understand John 3:16, the distinction between Father and Son should be blurred.

When I was in Divinity School studying preaching, a very learned professor told us impressionable students: Be certain about a passage when you step into the pulpit to preach. If you have doubt, you will convey doubt, he told us.

If you equivocate, you will engender fear and raise questions.

Today I am violating that fine advice. I have questions about John 3:16 and don't know quite how to answer them. Did God give his only Son to the world? Is there really a distinction between God and Jesus? If we believe in Jesus and therefore do not perish and have eternal life, are we the only ones to be so blessed? Is the reward of eternal life reserved solely for Christians?

I am struggling with great transparency before you today. And I am trusting that you will struggle too and wrestle with this text until it makes good sense for you.

I am uncomfortable with John 3:16 on Tim Tebow's eye black, and written on the bottom of disposable cups at a fast food chain. I don't want this passage to be the short-hand for our faith. It feels too exclusive, too small. I experience a vast, mysterious, all encompassing God who loves everyone-even those who don't believe in God. Maybe especially those who don't believe in God.

What touches me about John 3:16 is those first six words: for God so loved the world. Those words ring true. That is the God I know and experience. The God who so loves the world.

One of my favorite books is Love Poems from God. Daniel Ladinsky has studied the work of twelve sacred writers from east to west and made a compilation of what he considers their Love Poems from God. The volume contains the work of Rabia, St. Francis of Assisi, Rumi, Meister Eckhart, Hafiz, Kabir, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and others.

Their words are soft and healing and make me feel whole again when I have been broken. Their words remind me that God so loved the world.

Listen to some of their poems...

One Day by Rabia of Basra

One day He did not leave after
kissing me.

He Asked for Charity by St. Francis of Assisi

God came to my house and asked for charity.

I fell on my knees and
cried, "Beloved,

what may I

give?"

"Just love," He said. "Just love."

Your Hair, Your Face by St. Catherine of Siena

What is it

you want to change?

Your hair, your face, your body?

Why?

For God is

in love with all those things

and He might weep

when they are gone.

It Stops Working by Kabir

Look

what happens to the scale

when love

holds

it.

It stops working.

Preachers are supposed to know things....to be definite...to exalt, exhort, and exclaim. Today I am waffling, unsure about many things. But I feel confident that John 3:16 is worth wrestling with and I am not done wrestling with it-and I can be open with you about my wrestling. And you can wrestle with it also.

But today I do know one thing for certain...I know that those first six words in the often-quoted, very famous passage John 3:16 are true...for God so loved the world. That feels like enough, that feels like I can plant my feet right there and be comforted and sure. In fact, my faith is really built on those six words...for God so loved the world. The world. Not a part of the world, not just the white people or the men or the heterosexuals or the rich. For God so loved the world...all the pieces and all the parts of the world. God. So loved. The World...with a protective, expansive, limitless, unconditional, I-will-never-leave-you love.

I know that is true. I experience it in my own life.

I think those six words can actually shape our faith.

for God so loved the world...

That means you. And that means me.

And that means a lot.

Amen.