

December 8, 2008

Rediscovering Christmas
God's Love Is...
John 3:16-21

Opening Words: Before I begin, let me make a confession. I didn't struggle with this sermon on God's love, because I have always had an abundance of love in my life. I was born into a Christian home, where love was the very foundation. I can say this without any hesitation. My parents loved me. My sister loves me. We respect and like one another. I have experienced love within my expanded family. I am closer to my Aunt Phyllis now than in any other time in the past. I have love at home. My wife loves me and worries about me. We are so secure in our love that we give each other the space we need to do our own thing. Yet, the best time is when it is just the two of us. My children love me. I have close friends outside of this church who love me. There are people within this church who love me. There is no need for me to go on. You get the point. I am loved. If you can make a list of people who love you say, "**Amen!**" This is the Good News for today. God loves you too.

This is sermon number two in my new five-part sermon series, *Rediscovering Christmas*. In this sermon series, I am reminding you Christmas is not just a secular holiday. It is a religious holiday. It is a time for the faithful to remember the birth of the Savior of the world, the incarnation of God, Jesus. I began last week, the First Sunday of Advent, and will conclude on Christmas Eve. Our scripture reading for today is John 3:16-21. Let me call this message *God's Love Is...*

John 3:16-21 16 "For 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. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Founder and Pastor of the Saddleback Church in California, Rick Warren (born 1954) once said, "*God's love is like an ocean. You can see the beginning, but not the end.*" I like that quote. It speaks to me. If that quote speaks to you say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the third chapter of John. The scene is shared by two men. One is Jesus and the other is Nicodemus. You know Jesus. He was the son of God, the very incarnation of God, the Savior of the world. You may not be as familiar with

Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. That means he was respected by his society for his religious views. Daily, he must have answered people's spiritual questions, but in our reading for today, Nicodemus has a question for Jesus. Through the years, much has been made about the timing of his visit. It was night. Some say, he went at night to protect his identity. How would it look for a respected Pharisee to go to an itinerant preacher with questions? Some say, he went to Jesus at night because the day was complete and there would be time for the two to talk. No one really knows why Nicodemus went to Jesus at night, but we do know the question Nicodemus asked Jesus? The respected Pharisee was concerned about his own salvation. In verse 3, Jesus says, *I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* That verse triggers a long discussion between the two men. Jesus tells Nicodemus there is a great difference between the ways of this world and the ways of God. Jesus wasn't wrong. Nicodemus was confused and Jesus tries to simplify the matter in verse sixteen.

You know verse sixteen, *"For 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."* Many consider that verse to be the greatest verse in the Bible because it summarizes the Bible in one verse. Today, I want to dissect John 3:16. For in this single verse we discover three aspects of God's love. These points are not original. They came from James W. Moore (1938-2019). If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

First, John 3:16 tells us God's love is wide. One of the great personalities of church history was Martin Luther (1483-1546). The great German theologian and reformer will always be remembered as a man of God. He changed Western Civilization. It is easy to lift him to sainthood, but don't do it. Luther never considered himself a saint. He considered himself a normal man with limitations and human tendencies. Those closest to Luther knew the truth. He wasn't a patient man. He would often grow frustrated with the people around him. He once grew so frustrated that he said, *"If I were God and these vile people were as disobedient as they are now, I would knock the world into pieces!"* (How many ugly things have you said in a fit of rage?) The good news for his generation was Martin Luther wasn't God! Martin Luther was a human being, like you and me. He had limitations. This is part of the Good News for today. God does not have limitations.

John 3:16 begins, *For God so loved the world.* In other words, it talks about the width of God's love. Just think about that phrase for a moment. God loves the world! God's love is not selective. God loves everyone. He loves all nations. He loves people regardless of their language. He loves the rich and the poor. He loves people, regardless of their salvation systems and philosophies. He loves the attractive and the not so attractive. He loves the politically conservative and liberal. He loves everyone, regardless of their sexual tendencies. *For God so loved the world!* God loves everyone! That means God even loves you! Never question the width of God's love. If you are thankful for the width of God's loves say, **"Amen!"**

Second, John 3:16 tells us God's love is deep. There is an old preaching story about a medieval monk, who announced he would be preaching the next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." When that evening came the congregation gathered as shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lit a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First, he illumined the crown of thorns on his head, Next, the wounds in the crucifix's hands where the spikes were driven. Finally, she showed the congregation the scar where the spear was placed. A hush fell over the congregation. The monk blew out the candle and walked out without saying a word. There was nothing else to say. When you actually stop and consider the pain of the cross how can you question God's love? Never forget! God loves you!

John 3:16 continues, *he gave his one and only son.* In other words, it talks about the depth of God's love. God loves us but he didn't show up in a with a fist full of flowers, a box of candy, wearing boxer shorts. He wasn't interested in a one-night stand. God demonstrated his love for us by entering this world to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. That is what makes Good Friday so bad. Jesus, the incarnation of God, died on the cross to atone for your sins. That is a heavy thought. Jesus' death made eternal life possible for you and me! If you are thankful for the depth of God's love say, **"Amen!"**

Third, John 3:16 tells us God's love is powerful. In the book *Becoming a Whole Person in a Broken World* Ron Lee Davis tells the story of Marie. She was a little girl with a horrible life. Marie was raised in an abusive home. When she was twelve years old, her parents were drunk, and they began to fight. They began to struggle over a gun. In the struggle, the gun went off. Marie saw her father shot to death. In every way Marie shattered and ended up in a European mental hospital. She lived in a padded cell and acted out in violent ways. The doctors decided to treat her by using something called *catharsis*. In other words, they were going to let her vent her rage on someone else. The nurse who volunteered to be the victim was a woman by the name of Hilda. Daily, Hilda walked into Marie's padded cell and was attacked. Marie would kick her. Marie would scream at her. Marie would hit her. Marie spit on her and scratched her. The scene was ugly. However, after an hour Marie was exhausted and would sit in the corners of her cell and cried. It was at that moment Hilda completed the treatment. She would go over to Marie and hold her. She would whisper in her ears those little life changing words, "I love you." Little by little, the message got through. In time, Marie got better. She became a whole person. It maybe Marie's story, but it is the story of all mankind. Someone suffered so someone else could live.

John 3:16 ends, *that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.* God's love is powerful. Do you know of anyone who doesn't want to go to heaven? If you do, then there is only one option, you must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You must believe in Jesus and your hope of salvation will become a reality. It is the greatest gift you will ever receive. We are saved by grace and by grace alone. Good works has

nothing to do with salvation. It is too good to be true, but it is true. You can live the rest of your life not worrying about death. It is so liberating. However, it will change you. You will spend the rest of your life trying to find a way to thank God for saving your soul. The love of God is powerful. If you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior say, **"Amen!"**

Listen to John 3:16 one more time. *"For 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."* Did you hear the vastness of God's love? God's love is wide. God's love is deep. God's love is powerful.

What are you most afraid of? That was the question a panel was asked during the early 1960's radio show, *Conversation*. The panel was made up of various famous personalities of the day. Each one was an expert in a different field. They were to debate the question of the evening and come up with one single answer. The question for that evening was *what are you most afraid of?* After much heated debate, the answer was nuclear annihilation. Everyone agreed but one panelist remained silent. His name was Bennett Cerf (1898-1971). Do you remember Bennett Cerf? He was a Christian writer who was known for both his quick intellect and humor. He was one of the founders of Random House. He sat quietly and never tried to persuade the others. Later the master of ceremonies inquired about his nonparticipation. Cerf said, "My answer to the question, *what are you most afraid of*, seemed silly next to the rest." He finished by saying, "What I am most afraid of is not being loved." Can you imagine not being loved? The answer is no.

That may have been Bennett Cerf's great fear, but it is not your fear. The reason is obvious. There has never been a moment in your life when you weren't loved. God has always love you and God always will. *"For 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."* Rick Warren once said, *"God's love is like an ocean. You can see the beginning, but not the end."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**