

March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Gospel in a Nutshell
John 3:14-21

Opening words: Never underestimate the power of love! I read recently 60% of the world's population feels unloved. If correct, that means 4.4 billion people in our world do not feel loved. That explains why there is so much sadness in our world today. Never underestimate the power of love! Children who do not experience love share common characteristics as adults. In 2018, Psychology Today reported unloved children never recover. These are their common characteristics as adults:

1. They never feel a sense of belonging.
2. They never feel validated.
3. They never feel self-confident.
4. They never experience emotional balance.
5. They never find peace with the past.
6. They never feel confirmed.

Never underestimate the power of love. This is the Good News for today. That is not your story. There has never been a moment in your life when you have not been loved!

According to the Revised Common Lectionary, this is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. The lectionary reading for today takes us to the story of Nicodemus. It is in that story we find the Bible verse everyone knows, John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*" It is one of the most widely quoted Bible verses and has been called the most popular verse in the Bible. It has also been called the "Gospel in a Nutshell," because it is a summary of the central theme of Christianity. Today, we are going to analyze that single verse because it is so significant. Our Gospel reading for today is John 3:14-21. Let me call this message *The Gospel in a Nutshell*.

John 3:14-21 **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,

15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people 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 their deeds will be exposed.

21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

His name is Rollin Stewart (born 1944). Some called him "Rock'n Rollen." Others have called him the "The Rainbow Man." You may remember him. He was a born-again Christian, who during the 1970s and 1980s, was a fixture at American sporting events wearing his rainbow-colored afro-style wig holding a sign that read: John 3:16. He seemed to be everywhere. He was at the 1977 NBA Finals. He was at the 1979 MLB All-Star Game. He was at the 1980 Moscow Olympics Games, where he was arrested for a short time. In 1981, he was at the Masters in Augusta, Georgia, and in 1982, he was at the Indianapolis 500. At the height of his popularity, he was featured in a Budweiser Beer commercial and was portrayed by Christopher Walken on *Saturday Night Live*. Where is Rollin Stewart today? The man has made a few mistakes. Sadly, he is an inmate at the Mule Creek State Prison in Lone, California where he is serving three life sentences for kidnapping. If you would like to learn more about Rollen Stewart, then read the article, *The Rainbow Man: Lessons on How Not to Evangelize*. Today, I do not want to talk about Rollen Stewart. I want to talk about Rollen Stewart's sign. That leads us to our scripture reading for today.

We find ourselves today in the third chapter of John. Our reading is only part of a longer discussion between two men, Jesus, and Nicodemus. You know about Jesus because we speak of him regularly. Jesus was the Son of God, the very incarnation of God, our only hope of salvation. Nicodemus is not as famous, but he is still noteworthy. He was a respected member of his community. He was not just a Pharisee, an expert on the law. He was a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, also known as the Sanhedrin. That body was established to judge in the details of the law. Prior to our reading, we are told Nicodemus sought out Jesus at night. Much has been made over that fact. Some believe, he went to Jesus at night to protect his identity. After all, how would it look for a respected Pharisee, a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, to be looking for help from a lowly itinerant rabbi? I believe, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, because the work of the day was over and the two would have time to talk. The discussion begins with some flattering words. Nicodemus was impressed by Jesus's miracles. However, Jesus is not interested in being complimented. Jesus is more interested in salvation. The Master says it clearly, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."* Nicodemus hears the words but fails to understand them. Jesus is baffled by his spiritual ignorance. Jesus explains to Nicodemus his part in God's plan of salvation for the world. This is where John 3:16 comes into play. They are not Jesus's words. They are the words of the editor. The verse summarizes what is happening. *"For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."* The whole verse pivots on that little complex word, *love!*

In 1960, C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) wrote a book called The Four Loves. He explored the four kinds of loves found in the Christian faith. Each one is found in the Bible. The first word for love in the Bible is the Greek word EROS, which gives us the word erotic. It is sensual or passionate love. It is the kind of love that involves a box of candy, a fist full of flowers and boxer shorts. The second word for love in the Bible is the Greek word PHILA, which gives us the word philanthropist. It is a social love. For example, Andrew Carnegie was a philanthropist. He wanted to improve communities, so he gave a fortune to establish libraries in both the United States and Canada. The third word for love in the Bible is the Greek word STORGE. It is an empathic love. It is the kind of love you feel for family members. It is the kind of love you feel for your parents or your children. The fourth word for love in the Bible is the Greek word AGAPE. That is the word that is used in the New Testament for God's sacrificial love, which we see in Jesus. It is that Greek word for love that John uses in the Gospel lesson for today, John 3:14-21, *for God so loved the world*. There is nothing simple about that word. Consider these three things with me. These thoughts are not original. They came from United Methodist preacher James W. Moore (1938-2019).

First, God's love is wide! 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 all denominations. He loves people, regardless of their salvation systems. He loved all people, regardless of their sexuality. He loves the attractive and the not so attractive. He loves the rich and poor. God loves everyone! How do I know this divine truth? Because John 3:16 begins, *"For God so loved the world"*. That means God even loves you! Never question the width of God's love.

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. However, never forget, he was a man. He was limited by his human tendencies. He was not a man of great patience. 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 was not God! Martin Luther was a human being, like you and me. He had limitations. God is different. God has no limitations; God's love has no limitations. God's love is wide! God cannot stop loving you because God cannot stop loving everyone! Listen to the phrase again: *God so loved the world!* The last time I checked we were still in the world. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** God's love is wide!

Second, God's love is deep! 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 did not show up in a with a fist full of flowers, a box of candy, wearing boxer shorts. He was not

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! Never question the depth of God's love.

In July of 2019, Johnny and Dawn Vann were busy raising their seven children. One afternoon on a North Carolina Beach the unthinkable happened. A massive high tide wave hit the beach and four of the Vann's children swept into the ocean. Without thinking about his own safety, Johnny jumped into the water and save his children, one by one. The problem is he could not save himself. Rescue crews tried to save him. Despite 45 minutes of CPR, Johnny died. Dawn said her husband will always be remembered as a good person. I think she is wrong. I think John Vann will be remembered as a great person, because his love for his children was deep. He died so his children could live. How can you question his love? It is not just the story of a father and his children. It is the story of God and mankind. Jesus died so we could live. That is part of the message of John 3:16, *he gave his one and only son*. God's love is deep. Do you remember the words of Isaiah 53:5? It says, *"By his wounds we were healed."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Third, and finally, God's love is powerful! Do you remember the story of Clara Barton? During the Spanish-American War, she was overseeing the work of the Red Cross in Cuba. One day Colonel Theodore Roosevelt came to her, wanted to buy food for his sick and wounded Rough Riders. But she refused to sell him any. Roosevelt was perplexed. His men needed the help, and he was prepared to pay out of his own funds. When he asked someone why he could not buy the supplies, he was told, "Colonel, just ask for it!" A smile broke over Roosevelt's face. Now he understood--the provisions were not for sale. All he had to do was simply ask and they would be given freely. It is not just true of food in the Spanish-American War. It is also true of Heaven!

John 3:16 ends: *that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life*. Does anyone here 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. 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 sin sick soul. The love of God is powerful. If you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior say, **"Amen!"**

It is called the Gospel in a nutshell! The major theme of Christianity summarized in one verse. *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*. This is the Good News for today. You are loved! You have always been loved. You will always be loved. You are loved

today. God just cannot stop loving you. C.S. Lewis once said, "*Though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"