

God So Loved...

A sermon for Sermon for Lent 4B – March 14, 2021

St. Andrew Lutheran Church – Franklin, TN

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I'm willing to guess that most folks have had the experience. Watching a (pre-pandemic) pro sports event, the camera pans around the stadium or ballpark, showing the enthusiastic fans, many clad in their team's colors, and many are holding posters with varying slogans like "hit it here," "D-Fence," and the ever-present John 3:16. I remember being confused as a child, wondering why someone would make a poster with a Bible verse on it for a ball game. As an adult, I understand *some* may feel as if ensuring this scripture reference is broadcast on national television is a great evangelism effort. Because, after all, you never know when some random fan watching at home will feel compelled to look up that verse at halftime or between innings and have their life changed. As I think more about it, maybe the trend should be to make a poster citing *your favorite* Bible verse. People could watch the game and get a whole list of texts to look up: Psalm 23, Philippians 4:13, Proverbs 3:5-6 and so on. If nothing else, maybe we could increase biblical literacy that way!

Seriously, though, there's a reason John 3:16 is so popular. It clearly and succinctly declares God's love for us. Even Luther thought so, declaring this text to be the "gospel in miniature." And for good reason. Now, being the occasionally impulsive person that I am, I have a couple of reactions to those signs that say John 3:16. The one that most commonly comes up is a strong desire to take a big sharpie marker and run up to the posters and add "and 17." The other reaction is wanting to say "yes, but wait, there's more!" Because there is, indeed, more than just that one verse.

I think it's important for us to pay attention to what follows that sixteenth verse. Because while God's love is clearly conveyed there and we want to hold on to and focus on what God's love for us entails, this text is sometimes used in exclusionary ways. It's used to say who's up or down, in or out, right or wrong. Some wield John 3:16 as a weapon of sorts, using it

as a threat. Maybe you've heard an old statement that goes 'turn, don't burn!' It's as if they are saying believe, or else!

Verse 17 says "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." It sounds to me like God intends good for God's world. In fact, the Greek word here for "world" is *cosmos*, meaning all of creation. Divine love, God's love, is meant for all, for everything.

Throughout John's gospel, we find imagery of light and life. Here, Jesus speaks of people resisting light because they do not want their true selves and deeds to be revealed by it, perhaps because it feels easier to coast along cloaked in darkness. Verse 19 speaks of this light and darkness. The NRSV translation says, "And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." Karoline Lewis, a scholar of John, has offered her own translation (something she lovingly calls the **LRSV: Lewis Revised Standard Version**): "But this is the time for *discernment* because the light of the world is shining bright; and we choose to ignore what's being revealed." To me, the use of discernment here, instead of judgement, is particularly helpful. Instead of it sounding like people are being judged, it's more like people are doing some discerning. They are discerning (or will be discerning) what God is doing in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the light of the world. Jesus comes so we might be drawn into the light of God's love.

So, we see that God loves **us**. I wonder, though, what **we** love. For sure we love our tangible things, our possessions. We love status and recognition. We love good food, good times and spending time with folks we care about. We love control and knowing what to expect. The honest truth is that our human nature has us loving things that could be perceived as darkness, things that draw us away from God's love. Despite our love of distracting "other" things, God responds to us with love. We can deny, resist, wander off, and openly rebel...and God loves us. What do we do with that?

Following a God of love can sometimes feel scary. That persistent, always seeking us out kind of love can feel foreign to us. The total unconditionality of God's love can rub against our sometimes-transactional views of love – I

love you because you do 'xyz' for me, or because you make me feel a certain way. We struggle to love one another unconditionally. But God's love for us is simply "I love you." There is no because, unless it's to say I created you and you are mine. And when we follow a God that loves us so much, we are drawn into light. Light that casts out the darkness we sometimes crave or even create. Thinking back to Dr. Lewis' translation of verse 19, we find ourselves in moments of discerning – the light of the world is shining brightly. Are we going to live in that light? How will we live in the love that God demonstrates for us? Do we let fear keep us from trusting and moving into God's future? As we have seen throughout scripture, trusting God can mean taking steps into the great unknown. It can mean leaning in with hope and faith when we don't see exactly what lies ahead of us.

With the upheaval and transitions that have been part of our lives in the last year or so, especially here at Saint Andrew, it's understandable that we look back fondly on the 'before times' when we could be together face to face, worshiping, serving, and giving. We lament the changes that have been thrust upon us. And the further we get along this way, the more we have a tendency to romanticize the days gone by. But if we get too bogged down spinning our wheels about what we don't have anymore, or can't do the way we used to, we can get into a darker state of mind. What if we look at what God is up to?

God has been shining light into the life of Saint Andrew. In the midst of transitions and a pandemic, this family of faith has continued to worship, love, grow, serve and send. Online worship has become possible using cameras and technology to connect us to one another and many more beyond our immediate community. Faith formation classes and groups have carried on via Zoom. We have learned to love and care for each other by checking in on one another and reaching out to those with needs. We have grown by virtue of the reach of our online services. Saint Andrew has also not missed a beat in the area of serving and sending. Through many creative ways, including drive through breakfast drop-offs, this congregation continues to demonstrate the heart of a servant here in Franklin and beyond. God's love has lit the way through the call process and continues to do so.

We don't know what the future holds. And I don't know about you, but I'm already over the phrase "the new normal" because who even knows what normal is anyway? What we do know is that we have been led this far by God's love. Perhaps without always realizing it, we have responded to that love with trust and faith. In the midst of uncertainty, we have learned so much and found new ways to do things, some of which will continue to shape our mission and ministry moving forward.

We know that God's love for us is strong. And God's love is stronger than any darkness that threatens us: stronger than death, violence, and hatred. God's love is stronger than indifference, division and uncertainty. God's love **will** continue to light the way into the days, months, and years ahead, drawing us in so we may be fed and nourished and sent back out to be light bearers to a weary world. The same world God so loves.

Amen.

