

Sandra Stogsdill Brown

*SO LOVED!*

A sermon on John 3:14-21

March 11, 2018

A little context before our Gospel reading today . . . the setting is, Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, has come to pay Jesus a visit at night. You can see a portrayal of Nicodemus in one of our Tiffany windows, carrying a lamp to light his way as he comes to Jesus in the darkness of the night. Nicodemus says to Jesus, “We know that you are a teacher from God,” and then Jesus talks about being born again, and Nicodemus doesn’t quite get it, and as Jesus is teaching him, Jesus reminds him of a story from the book of Numbers in the Hebrew scriptures, about the time when the Israelites were suffering from a plague of snakes. The people cried out to God, and God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and then when people were bitten by snakes, they could look up at the snake and live. You can read all about that in Numbers chapter 21, if you’re interested, but meanwhile, our Gospel reading today begins at John 3:14 and continues through verse 21. Hear the word of the Lord . . .

When I was a freshman in college, I had a reputation. I had a nickname. In my dorm, my friends called me Sandra “Hallelujah” Stogsdill, because I faithfully went to Bible Study every week and didn’t drink alcohol or go to fraternity parties (there’s a chance I may have made up for that in seminary, but that’s a story for another day). Anyway, one day, some friends came up to me, the resident religious expert, and said, “Sandra, we were at a game today and there were these people holding up a sign that said John 3, and then there was a colon, and then a number 16. Is that from the Bible? What is that?”

I said, “Oh, sure, that’s John 3:16,” and I proceeded to recite it so they would know what it said. They stared at me with big eyes and mouths hanging open. “Wow,” they said, “That’s amazing that you know that!” And I was a little startled by their astonishment, even if they were flute majors from the East Coast, because it’s really not that amazing to know John 3:16 if you’ve grown up going to church at all.

In fact, close your Bibles, and see if you can say John 3:16 with me, in whatever version you know it best: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes

him shall not perish, but have eternal life. Good job! Like it or not, this seems to be the verse most associated with our Christian faith, and therefore, it's probably good to take a closer look at it from time to time.

Do you remember the first time you ever heard that verse? Do you remember how old you were, and where you were? Me neither. Do you remember what it meant to you, when you heard it, and has that meaning changed at all as your faith has grown?

When I first learned this verse as a little girl, I heard it like this: God loved people so much that God sacrificed his only Son, Jesus, so that everyone who believed this would go to heaven when they die. That there are people who go to heaven, and people who don't, and if I believe, I get to go, which is a very reassuring thought when you're six years old and just beginning to grasp the terrifying thought that you're going to have to die someday. I couldn't understand why anybody would NOT believe such a wonderful thing. Seemed like a no-brainer to me. Of course, my idea of belief at that time was to simply say yes to this inside my head. . .

As I got older, and maybe this happened to you, too, I began to have some questions. For example, how could a God who loved the WORLD make heaven conditional on believing something? What if you tried to believe, and just couldn't do it? I mean, I can't believe that the earth is flat, though apparently some people do. And I can't believe that the Jewish holocaust did NOT happen—I believe it did. If we're saved by the grace of God, what is the role of belief? What is the mathematical formula for salvation? If my ability to believe impacts whether or not I am saved, then how can my salvation be through grace alone? Perhaps you also had this question: does a God who loves the WORLD really deny people eternal life because they can't believe something? REALLY? And why is it that some of my agnostic friends seem to do a

FAR better job of living in a Christ-like manner than some of my acquaintances who firmly believe John 3:16 and go to church every week, do you ever wrestle with that question?

Prince Caspian is the name of the second book in “The Chronicles of Narnia,” by C.S. Lewis. And in that book the four children of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe return to Narnia, and Lucy, the youngest, is the first to meet Aslan, the lion again. She says to him, “Aslan, you’re bigger.” He answers, “That’s because you’re older, little one.” She says, “Not because you are?” He says, “I am not. But every year you grow older, you will find me bigger.” It’s a quote often used to talk about the way God gets bigger and bigger as we mature in our faith. And as this happens, scripture can also start to sound a little different, even time-honored classics like John 3:16 and its surrounding verses. Forty years later, some of the words have taken on whole new dimensions.

For example, the world **WORLD**. God so loved the **WORLD**. Not just good people. Not just people who try hard. Not even just people, but the **WORLD**. Animals, and plants. Rivers, streams, soil, sand, oceans, planets, stars. Scorpions, mosquitoes, clownfish, and baby kittens. We can’t love God and not love what God loves, and now I hear a clarion call in John 3:16 to care for the earth to the best of my ability.

The word **BELIEVE** is another one. We modern folks hear the word believe, and think, something I do with my mind. When we say we believe something today, we mean that we say yes with our intellect. Like, we believe that smoking causes cancer, or we believe in capitalism or the theory of evolution. But the way this word is used in the Gospel of John goes much deeper. Not a checklist of beliefs, but an attitude and a way of life. Something we do, not something we think. To believe in Jesus isn’t to believe facts about him, but to live the way he lived, and love the way he loved.

Then there's that word, CONDEMN. God so loved the world, and then there's all this talk about condemnation, which we cannot ignore if we want to be responsible readers of scripture. "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed. . . ." I used to hear this as, those who do not believe are condemned by GOD. That God doesn't like it when people don't believe, so God punishes them. But if we look carefully at the structure of the sentence, it isn't like that at all. Those who do not believe are condemned already. Not because God smites them, but because not believing is its own punishment. To live in this world without hope that there is a God who loves us, without hope that God will bring justice and mercy where there is incredible injustice and suffering, with no hope that God will make all things new, including us, and buying into the distorted values of a world that is absolutely addicted to money and violence and outward beauty—that is its own punishment.

And the word LIGHT. John 3:19, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." The judgment is that God gave us a gift and we didn't want it! How can that be?

Have you ever stumbled out of the movie theater on a bright, sunny summer day, and found yourself squinting in the light? When we're used to darkness, light hurts. If you garden or have houseplants, you've seen how light makes things grow. A plant will expand and outgrow its pot if it gets the right light. Bright light reveals the crumbs and dust and stains in our homes, and the wrinkles and spots in our faces. Don't we all have times when we don't want to come out of the movies, and we don't want to outgrow our nice, safe little pot, and we don't want to see ourselves the way we really are? Don't we all have times when we'd rather stay in the dark?

God so LOVED the world. Imagine for a moment the most loving person you know. I hope you know many. One of the most loving people I know is my mother-in-law, Kathy Brown. Kathy Brown loves just about everybody. Her whole face lights up when she sees you, even if she just saw you yesterday. If you ever go to Grantville United Methodist Church, you can easily spot Kathy during greeting time. They are a hugging congregation, so she'll be the one who hugs every single person in the church before she sits down. A couple of years ago, when Rod's parents were celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we were all sitting down and ready to listen to their children make speeches and enjoy a special concert in their honor, but we couldn't get started for the longest time, because Kathy was so touched by the presence of each and every guest, and couldn't bear to cut a conversation short or hurry anyone through the receiving line. But as loving as she is, I'm pretty sure that Kathy would not give Rod to save the world. We'd just have to accept our fate, because even Kathy has to draw the line somewhere.

My mother-in-law loves deeply and wholeheartedly, but even Kathy Brown can't come close to loving the way God loves.

The poet William Blake wrote, “. . . we are put on earth a little space, that we might learn to bear the beams of love.”

God so LOVED the WORLD. I hear this today not as a litmus test of who is in and who is out, but as a call to each one of us to learn to bear the beams of God's love. To accept the embarrassing, overwhelming abundance and acceptance God offers. To gaze on Jesus, high and lifted up, and be caught up in a love that even on our very best days, we understand only a little. The more we live as though we believe we are loved, the more we will believe it. The more we live it, the more we will KNOW it. And to live like that is everlasting life, indeed. It's a quality and depth of life we can have today, not just when we die.

Over the next six months or so, your session will be spending time discerning God's vision and purpose for this beloved congregation in this time and place. We will pray, and pray again, and when we're all prayed out, we'll pray some more. We'll listen. We'll use words like mission, discipleship, obedience, and yes, even evangelism. We'll steep ourselves in scripture, and as we do, we'll never lose sight of this one: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Like a classic Bach Prelude or Beatles song, it never goes out of style. Maybe the folks who wave those signs around at sporting events are on to something . . .