

3/10/24
Mary Curlew

Most if not all of us here know or have an association with verse John 3:16.

The NRSV translation that we have for today is a bit different from the one I memorized as a Pioneer Girl for Jesus in the American Baptist Church in which I grew up so I almost missed it when I was preparing my sermon for today. Did any of you memorize this verse for Sunday school as well? If not, maybe you are more familiar with it as the chapter and verse written on numerous banners lifted up during NFL football games? Or if you are a Keith Urban fan you know it through his song- John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16 where he states he learned everything he needed to know from these three icons. If you know it, join me, not the song, the verse by the way. I learned the KJV, so if you learned a different translation, feel free to say whichever one you remember. I'm not going to look at my notes and you can't look at your bulletin. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." This verse, like my childhood phone number, 28-22835, has been with me for as long as I can remember and the memory of it has never been lost, unlike either of my two sons' cell phone numbers or where I put my glasses.

I think John 3:16 is significant for me personally, and maybe for you also, not only because I memorized it as a child but also because this verse grew into something much greater as I grew up as well. Although Martin Luther described this verse as the heart of the bible and the Gospel in miniature in the 16th century,

and the Israelites simply needed to look at the symbol of healing, the snake on the pole, and they were saved from death – an “easy peasy” salvation based on a simple affirmation of faith. That one doesn’t sit well with me at all however because I love my friends who haven’t accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and savior, and I have a hard time believing my love is broader and more generous than God’s.

And that is the problem with any theology that relies on human initiative to bring about God’s love. As Bob Kaylor, a Methodist pastor and writer states in his article on Wesley’s own four spiritual laws, the problem with any easy peasy theology of salvation is that it does not “go far enough in expressing the breadth and depth of the gospel as the transforming power of God’s grace not only for me but for the whole world, and not only for the joy of eternity at death but also the joy of salvation in the present” While the evangelistic strategy of the Four Laws was all about getting people into heaven, Jesus was more concerned with getting heaven, God’s transforming love, into people. John 3:16 is not the secret password to salvation but is instead Jesus’ affirmation that the story of God’s love as revealed in the Torah, those stories of Moses and the Israelites that Jesus would have grown up with, is present today and has the power to heal.

It is this interpretation of Jesus’ words in John’s Gospel that the Ephesians are encouraged to adopt. “For by grace you have been saved, *or transformed,*

yet. In this way, we are in the same boat with our evangelical siblings. We are all working out our salvation, or being healed, reconciled, by believing that God is working in our lives. God comes to us. So, my challenge for you this week is to look for God's love in your life and in the life of the church. Find some God moments, some light in the darkness no matter how dim or how small. And then notice how that love is transforming you and making you and that situation alive again in Christ.