

God SO Loved Who...?

St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church
The Village at Gleannloch
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Lent II

If I were to say the numbers, “3:16,” what would you say?

Wow! Some of you didn't even say “John 3:16,” you just started quoting the verse: “For God so loved the world . . . “

If there is one Bible verse both locked down and totally lapsed Christians might know, it is John 3:16.

Thank you, Tim Tebow.

John 3:16 is held up at half –time in sports arenas. It is flashed on cardboard placards on freeway off-ramps. Tim Tebow found a creative new place to assert John 3:16 when he scraped out the three numbers in the black-out smears he made on his cheekbones before every one of his college football games.

We all know John 3:16.

By the way, it is amazing how significant the “3:16” verses are. For example,

- John 3:16 - Highlights God's love and the promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus.
- 1 Timothy 3:16 - Affirms the mystery of godliness, emphasizing Christ's incarnation and resurrection.
- 2 Timothy 3:16 - States that all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching and correction.
- Proverbs 3:16 - Connects wisdom with long life and riches, illustrating the benefits of following God's guidance.
- Revelation 3:16 - Warns against being lukewarm in faith, urging believers to be fervent in their commitment.
- Colossians 3:16 - Encourages believers to let the word of Christ dwell richly in them, promoting worship and teaching.

But today I want to focus on John 3:16

According to the Christian History Institute, a man named George Bennard was struggling with personal problems that were causing him a great deal of trouble and anguish. In his suffering, his mind returned again and again to Christ's anguish on the

cross. This, he thought, was the heart of the gospel! The cross he pictured was not ornate, or pretty, or gold or silver. It was “a rough, splintery thing, stained with gore.”

George Bennard was under the influence of our text for the day, John 3:16. “I saw the Christ of the Cross,” he said later, “as if I were seeing John 3:16 leave the printed page, take form and act out the meaning of redemption.” We all know John 3:16. Let’s say it together: “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.”

And so, in a room in Albion, Michigan, Bennard sat down and wrote a tune. But he struggled with the lyrics. In fact, he could only come up with one line . . . He struggled for weeks to set words to the melody he had written.

Then Bennard, a Methodist evangelist, was scheduled to preach a series of messages in New York. He found himself focusing on the cross. The theme of the cross grew increasingly more urgent to him. He struggled once more with the words to his hymn. This time the lines came. He later told a friend, “I sat down and immediately was able to rewrite the stanzas of the song without so much as one word failing to fall into place. I called in my wife, took out my guitar, and sang the completed song to her. She was thrilled!”

On June 7, 1913, George Bennard introduced the new hymn in a revival meeting he was conducting in Pokagon, Michigan. The words went like this: “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame; and I love that old cross where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain. So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown . . .” (1)

The Old Rugged Cross became one of the most popular hymns of the twentieth century. What impressed me, however, was how Bennard described his feelings as he struggled to bring his feelings to the printed page: “I saw the Christ of the Cross as if I were seeing John 3:16 leave the printed page, take form and act out the meaning of redemption.”

John 3:16 has had that effect on many people. That is why, even though our lesson from the Gospels for the day is John 3:1-17, we’re going to focus our attention on this one verse. Martin Luther called John 3:16, “the Gospel in Miniature.” If all you had of the New Testament was this one verse, it would be enough to save your soul. “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.”

We’ve heard this beautiful verse so often we’re tempted to take it for granted. But have you ever thought what it would mean if you just changed one or two key words in this sentence? Let’s change one verb: *For God so **rejected** the world.* Makes a big difference in the sentence, doesn’t it? It nearly happened in the story of Noah, didn’t it?

God nearly rejected the world. But, instead, He placed a rainbow in the sky as a symbol of a covenant that He was making with humanity never to flood the earth again. But that's how it could have read: God so rejected the world . . .

Or we could change the first noun. It could read like this: *For God so loved **Israel***. That's what many of the Israelites believed. They believed because they were God's chosen people that meant that God loved them more than the other people of the earth. The prophets had to remind them that they were chosen to be a light to the other peoples and not that God loved them more. Of course, the verse could read: *For God so loved **America***. It doesn't read that way, by the way, in case any of you have a doubt.

Or, it could read, *for God so loved **nice people***. But it doesn't read that way either. It says, *For God so loved the world . . .* That's everybody—the rich, the poor, the beautiful, the ugly, the saint, the sinner.

Or we could tinker with the second half of the verse: *For God so loved the world that He gave it a **stern warning** . . .* God did give many stern warnings in the Old Testament. But they rarely did much good. The people still went their own way. Nothing much made a difference until, "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son . . ."

How about if we just changed the last few words in the last half of the sentence? *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son **to tell us how to be happy and comfortable in life***. That one sounds great, doesn't it? A lot more people would probably be won to Christianity if we made that last sentence our motto. But that is not how it reads either.

This morning we're going to spend some time with this little verse—[John 3:16](#).

Listen again to this verse and consider what a world of difference it would make if even one word were changed: "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."

Last week we kicked off the season of Lent by focusing on the goodness of God. If you understand God's goodness, we noted, you will trust God's plan.

This week we're focusing on another aspect of God's character, His love. There's nothing in this entire universe that can compare with God's love.

Some of you are probably fans of the veteran actress and singer Cher. She's been around for a long time, but she still looks great. It's not by accident. Cher likes to make fun of her many plastic surgeries and beauty treatments. She says, "I'm the female equivalent of a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Half of what you see is a pretty darn good reproduction, the rest is a fraud." (2)

When we compare human love—full of selfishness and pettiness and prejudice—to God’s holy, sacrificial, unending love, we can see immediately that human love is often a counterfeit love: half of it is a pretty darn good reproduction, the rest is a fraud. How do we measure what real love is? [John](#) 3:16 is what real love is all about.

“For God so loved the world . . .”

The verse begins by announcing that God loved us, all of us, even before we loved Him. It would be nice if it said that we first loved God. The truth of the matter is, however, that human beings are actually not very adept at this love business. We are well meaning, but if there is one lesson from human history, it is that we can hate just as easily as we can love. We can even hate in the name of Him whose very nature is love.

There is another place in [John](#)’s writing in which he says something profound about love. In [1 John](#) 4:8 we read these powerful words, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” Then, in verse 10 [John](#) adds, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us . . .” Think about those words for a moment. “Whoever does not love does not know God . . .”

It always amazes me to discover how often people have hated in the name of God. They certainly cannot justify such vile behavior in the New Testament. Remember in [1 Corinthians](#) 13 how St. Paul wrote, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing . . .” (1-3)

Friend, this is what the Gospel is all about, love. “Whoever does not love does not know God,” says St. [John](#). Why? “Because God is love.” God is the measure of real love, and it is only by God’s Spirit that we are able to know and share real love.

God loved us before we were even capable of loving Him in return. That’s always a risk, isn’t it? Being the one who expresses love first. To put your heart out there and hope the other person feels the same way about you. But God didn’t wait for us to love Him. God knew we would break His heart. God loved us knowing full well that we would never be able to return His love. His love was truly unconditional.

A very compassionate woman named Rene Denfield adopted a little girl from the foster care system in her city. Three years later, a caseworker called and said she had another child Rene might be interested in. He was just a toddler, but he’d already suffered a great deal in his short life. The little boy named Tony had bounced from one foster home to another. His rage and his acting out were too much for other families to

handle. But the caseworker believed Rene, who grew up in an abusive family herself, had the love and toughness to get through to this scared little boy.

The little fellow, named Tony, was destructive and unpredictable and lashed out at everyone who tried to love him. As Rene wrote in an article for *The New York Times*, “When he raged, I told him I loved him. I told him over and over.” Rene reports that it took years before Tony’s rages subsided. But one day, he was in the middle of playing on the floor when he looked up at Rene and said simply, “You brought me home. I love you too.” (3)

How long did Rene Denfield have to wait to hear those words? How many temper tantrums and destructive outbursts did she have to endure? It doesn’t seem to matter. She was determined to love Tony forever, even if he could never love her back.

Notice that [John 3:16](#) doesn’t say, “For God so loved good people who loved God back.” It says, “For God so loved the world. . .” No limitations, no exclusions, no maybes, no fine print. Are you a part of this world? Then you are completely lovable in God’s eyes. God loved us first. That’s the first thing we need to see.

Here’s the second: this verse tells us how much God loves us. God so loved us that He gave us His most precious gift—His Son.

It’s easy to say, “I love you.” People say it all the time. Sometimes they even mean it. It’s a different thing, however, to put love into action.

[John Robert Fox](#) was an African-American artillery officer who served in the U.S. Army in World War II. In December 1944, he and his unit were assigned to patrol an area of Tuscany in Italy that had been overrun by Nazi soldiers. Fox and a handful of his men joined a small troop of Italian soldiers in a small Tuscan village. All the residents of that village had already fled. Fox and his small band of soldiers hid in an abandoned house in the village and reported to their fellow soldiers back in base camp on the movement of Nazi troops through the town.

Imagine the surprise of Fox’s fellow soldiers at the base camp when he radioed a set of bombing coordinates to them and ordered them to begin shelling a certain neighborhood in that village. Here’s why they were surprised: the coordinates were very close to where Fox and his men were hiding! The gunner who received the order deliberately changed the coordinates slightly to protect the American soldiers.

A second time, Fox radioed in and ordered the gunner to bomb the coordinates he had sent them. The gunner argued with Fox. It was too close to his hiding place. He was putting himself and his men in danger.

Fox radioed back a third time. He made it clear to the gunner that he knew what he was doing. The house they were hiding in was surrounded by Nazi

soldiers. John Robert Fox's last words were, "Fire it. There's more of them than there are us." Fox and his men were laying down their own lives to defeat the Nazi troops. The gunner ordered the bombing strike. More than 100 Nazi soldiers were killed in the strike, along with Fox and his men. Their sacrifice gave the American troops time to regroup and launch a successful counterattack. The Allied troops regained the village and drove out the Nazi forces. In 1997, John Robert Fox was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his "gallant and courageous actions, at the supreme sacrifice of his own life." (4)

To give up your own life to ensure that others could live—is there any greater love than this? God loved us first. God loved us enough that He gave His one and only Son. But why did He give His Son? You know the answer: "That whosoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life."

Do you believe in him? I mean really believe in him? Would you be willing to give your life for him as he did for you? As we said earlier, it's easy to say "I love you," it's another to put love in action.

Let me tell you one more true story. Alfred Vanderbilt was the great grandson of billionaire businessman Cornelius Vanderbilt. There was nothing particularly praiseworthy about how Alfred lived his life. He used his massive inheritance to invest in real estate and horses, and to throw lavish parties. But here is why we remember Alfred Vanderbilt.

In 1915, he set sail on the British ocean liner the Lusitania heading toward London. At the time, Europe was embroiled in World War I, but nobody thought that enemy troops would attack a civilian ship. Sadly, they were wrong. German U-boats attacked the Lusitania as it sailed off the coast of Ireland.

As a First Class passenger, Vanderbilt was guaranteed a lifejacket and a seat on one of the first lifeboats leaving the ship. However, Alfred Vanderbilt refused his rights. He gave away his lifejacket and his seat on the lifeboat. As the ship slowly sank into the water, Alfred Vanderbilt focused on getting as many children into the lifeboats as possible. He died saving others. A *New York Times* journalist described his last moments as "gallantry which no words of mine can describe." (5)

How do you describe a love that is unearned, undeserved, given freely and generously and sacrificially for the sake of everyone, whether they can ever return that love or not? That's God's love. God had a million reasons to condemn the world. But He didn't. God saved the world by giving the absolute greatest gift He could give. And God made us a promise that whoever believes—yes, *whoever* believes in God's Son, Jesus Christ, will not perish but have eternal life. Have you accepted that promise in your own life?