

Willingly Waiting: Waiting in Love – John 3:16

Merry Christmas! I hope you are ready to celebrate this week. I'm sure in your family there are moments that stand out from previous Christmas's that someone will bring up this year. Someone will say, "Remember the time..." and then recount a beloved story or moment.

We have a couple of those moments in Bethany's family. There's a famous picture that gets circulated every year of my sister in law receiving a pair of boots about 15-20 years ago. Her reaction was so pure and excited that it's become the standard of joy for opening a gift. You may be excited, but not as excited as Cara was opening those boots. Somewhere along the line a child opened a gift that was a piece of clothing and said, "I love it, I'll wear it" and now every Christmas when someone opens pants or a sweatshirt or even socks, someone says, "I love it, I'll wear it."

Those sort of Christmas memories replayed are part of what makes this season so special. As we rehearse those memories it brings the feelings from those previous celebrations into the present and builds an incredible delight into Christmas.

This morning I want to rehearse something with you that I hope can help you to delight in Christmas in a more substantial way this year. Here at WBC we've been preparing for Christmas by focusing on a particular topic for each Sunday of Advent. Hope, Peace, and Joy so far. These are the traditional themes for those Sundays and today we come to the last Sunday before Christmas and it's no surprise what the theme is, Love.

When most people think about love in the Bible they think about one verse above all others, John 3:16. It's probably the most familiar verse in all of Scripture, to the point where it may have become cliché and lost some of its meaning. Even if you don't read the Bible, you probably will recognize these words, *"For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."* But I want to rehearse it this morning to make sure we understand the importance of it and so we can celebrate Christmas with a better

grasp of God's great love for us. So, here's what we will look at in the next few moments this morning. **4 Truths About Love to Help You Embrace Christmas.**

1. Love Starts with God

If you are open to John 3:16 I want you to notice the first few words of the verse. "For God so loved". The fact that this famous verse begins with the word "for" tells you that it's explaining the reason for what has come before it. So, what has come before this verse? Well, the first 15 verses of John 3 are a conversation between a Pharisee, Nicodemus, and Jesus. What are they talking about? Look back up to verse 3. The topic is how to enter the kingdom and this isn't possible without being born again.

John 3:16 gives the foundation for entering God's kingdom or being born again. And the foundation starts with God's love. Now, when we say that God loves we have to make sure we understand what that means. Love means a lot of things in our culture. For many people it simply means acceptance or affirmation. But to truly understand love we have to grasp God's love because love starts with God.

God has always existed and has always been a God of love. He created all things out of love and sustains all things by His love. The theologian Jonathan Edwards described God's love as a fountain overflowing and spilling out into everything He says and does. The Bible tells us this repeatedly. Listen to Exodus 34:6, Lamentations 3:22-23, and 1 John 4:7-10.

But what does it mean that God is love? God gives of Himself for the good of others. This is different from simple affirmation or acceptance. To truly give for another's good is to know what is good for that person. It's to define goodness and truth. And God knows the best thing for humanity is to know and love God and so God gives us Himself as our highest good. This was the original plan. God created humans to live in a relationship of love and communion with Him. This is love. But this plan was disrupted and broken and this is our second truth.

2. Love Stops with Man

Let's add the next couple of words in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world." When you and I think of "world" we probably think of the globe we are living on.

The planet. But that's not what the apostle John means when he writes world here. Listen to 1 John 2:15-17. The world is mankind in rebellion against the God of love. It's the system that defies God with human desires and sin. If you are still in John 3, look down to verses 19-20. Now listen to John 1:9-11.

The reality is that we are all a part of this rejection of God's love. We all are born into this world loving the darkness. We have chosen to selfishly pursue our own desires rather than to love God and this breaks the relationship with God. We have rejected our highest good, God's love.

And this puts us in a predicament. While God truly loves His creation, He also cannot allow sin to violate His holiness and love. He will not simply affirm us in our rebellion. So, humans are born under the sentence of judgment for their sin. And there's nothing you or I can do on our own to satisfy the demands of justice and to re-establish a relationship with God. It's into this situation that God acts on His own, apart from any good from you or me.

3. Love Shows Up by Grace

Let's add a few more words from John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that He gave." A gift. You will get gifts this Christmas and a gift is different from Karma. It's different from a paycheck. You cannot earn a gift.

When you see in John 3:16 that God gave a gift I want you to think of the word grace. Grace is the heart of the story of God's redemption. One of my favorite books I read this year is called *The Big Relief* and it's all about God's grace. The author, David Zahl, describes grace using three big ideas. First, grace is incongruous. What does that mean? Well, something is congruous when it matches. There's proportionality to it. But that's not grace.

God's grace is incongruous. *There is a marked and even scandalous incongruity between the gift and the person who receives it; the gift's value is not indexed to any perceived worthiness in the recipient. Grace is fundamentally lopsided.* – David Zahl

Second, Zahl says that grace defies predictable timing. In other words, God's grace is never in response to something we do or are. God's grace comes first. It

initiates. God sees us in our pitiful and rebellious condition and takes the first step.

Third, God's grace is superabundant. I'll let Zahl describe this: *This refers to the scale of the gift. God does not hold back but exceeds the spending limit by leaps and bounds. There is something overflowing, something mind-bogglingly maximal about the way God gives. In fact, God's gift is excessive to the point that it is personally costly. This isn't a no-skin-off-my-back situation, akin to Scrooge McDuck bulldozing a pile of gold in our direction when there are still mountains of doubloons in the background. No, the giver feels it. This means that grace, for it to qualify as divine, involves an element of sacrifice.* – David Zahl

So, what is the gracious and superabundant gift that God has given at great cost to Himself? Let's add some words in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." The gift is Jesus Christ. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. God's incongruous, first step, superabundant gift of His Son to us. 1 John 4:9 put it like this. You can see at the end of verse 9 the purpose of this gift and this is our last truth this morning.

4. Love Seeks to Reconcile

Let's add the rest of John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life." Then, let's keep reading into verse 17. To perish is to die physically without experiencing the new birth that John 3 describes. But Jesus Christ came into the world and died on the cross and rose from the dead in victory over sin and death so that we might have eternal life.

Now, when you hear about eternal life it's easy to think of life that goes on forever. But this is talking about the quality of life, not just the length of it. So, you may ask someone if he or she is living a good life, a fun life, or a difficult life. Those are qualities of life. Eternal life is the same way. Eternal life means the life of God. Life defined by a relationship with God. Listen to John 1:1-4.

We are made to live with this kind of life. We are made to draw close to God and know God and love God. We are made to walk with Him daily. Augustine put it like

this, You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. – Augustine of Hippo

We are not made to have self at the center of the universe. You aren't meant to live a life that is all about you. And so, God's gracious gift of His Son has the purpose of reconciling you to God Himself. God's love seeks to bring you back into a relationship with Him because this is your highest good and God's love wouldn't be love without loving you in this way.

How does this reconciliation happen? Look again at John 3:16. By believing in God's Words about His Son and His work for You. By turning from your own path of life in repentance and turning to Jesus Christ in faith. Accept God's gift given to you apart from anything you could possibly do merit it.

This is love in its truest and best form. All other love gets its meaning and purpose from this love. I hope these truths about love can help you to celebrate Christmas in a deeper and richer way this year and to remember what has been done for you. Let's pray.