

SERMON

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God so loved the world. I don't know how many times I've heard it. I don't know how many times I've said it or sung it or thought it. It has become so baked into our faith that it has become all but a cliché that can be discarded as too simple, too basic to carry much weight anymore as we've searched for deeper truth, deeper understanding, deeper faith. Or maybe it has come to mean something other than what Jesus actually said.

There certainly is more to our faith than any one verse can capture, but this verse can forge a lens through which we see what God is doing. There's always a lens. There's always a personal experience or worldview that helps us read the living word of God and helps us understand.

Nicodemus brings his experience as a Pharisee, as a leader of the Jewish people in occupied Rome, to this itinerant Rabbi. He comes at night – perhaps because he's trying to avoid notice. Already in John's Gospel, the conflict between Jesus and those in power is brewing. Jesus has overturned the trade of the temple. Jesus has begun revealing signs of God's kingdom and those of a different view would rather hold onto power than change their truth.

And Nicodemus isn't yet ready to believe the truth. He wants to understand. He asks questions to learn, but in the night of this encounter, he's still shaded by the history of what he has learned. The Messiah is a revolutionary king. The Messiah is the promised conqueror. We have but one birth into this world and one life to live. Those are Nicodemus' truths.

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” We don't understand the movement of the spirit when we're trapped in our own worldview and try to fit God's work into the world.

So when we hear the words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” we determine that it is a formula of how we are saved. Believe in God and we will not perish and have eternal life. It becomes something we do. We believe and are therefore saved from death. We believe and so our soul gets to live on in some indeterminate heaven. If we believe, then God loves us.

We form our lens entirely around this intellectual concept of belief as if it's something we can figure out and we completely forget what God is actually doing.

God **so** loved the world. It's such a simple word, "so." 2 points in a scrabble game. Lost in the weight of other seemingly more important words of this verse. But it gives us the truth about God. John intentionally tells the story of Jesus with these words loaded with more than one meaning. "So" can describe the way in which God loves the world. Or "so" can describe **how much** God loves the world. There is no definitive answer in translating the Greek word, so we have to assume both meanings. This is the way God loved the world, and God loved the world so much that God's Son was given. God acted. God gave us life, not because we believe but **so that** we would believe. In order that we would be transformed from inhabitants of this world to inhabitants of the kingdom of God. All of us. The world.

When we come to the end of John's Gospel, or at least one of the endings, we learn that this whole story has been told, "so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." The summary verse at the end tells us that this verse is the thematic foundation of everything we will read and experience. All that John writes is written to transform us into believers.

And "believing" through this Gospel's lens is about being transformed, about having God's abundant life, about being moved out of the world's truth into the kingdom's truth. That's how God loves the world. That's what God is doing by sending Jesus into this world.

Instead of trusting in that truth of what God is doing, we get caught up in defining "born again." We create a rite of passage on our terms, you have to say a certain prayer or be baptized a certain way to be a "believer." You have to know the right words, you have to act the right way.

But "belief" in John's Gospel starts and ends with being in relationship with God. John will go on to repeatedly use the word "abide" – in Greek, "meno" – to define discipleship. Believing in God means remaining in relationship with God and God's Son Jesus. It's not that we have all the answers figured out, it's that we trust that God has come. When we do that, we experience the life that God brings to us – through the Son.

If we don't, we're not condemned – that's why you can't read verse 16 without verse 17. God doesn't come to condemn; God comes so that we can live. God loves the world, so God saves the world.

Nicodemus will show up again at the end of the story – we don't know if he has become a believer, but we know that he helps care for Jesus after he is crucified. We know that the Spirit continued to blow through his life so that he would know just how much God loved him.

We know the truth of this good news – that we are part of the world that God loves. Last time I checked, no country is elevated and no country is excluded from “the world.” God’s love is stronger than the power of the world’s hate. God claims and re-claims the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Into that truth we are born from above. In that truth we live. Amen.