

Loved

John 3:14-21

"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." If you grew up going to Sunday school, you cannot remember a time when you did not know this particular verse of Scripture. It is and has been the centerpiece of uncounted Sunday school and vacation Bible school classes and is frequently lifted up as the perfect summation of Christian faith. I remember this verse from my Sunday School, Sunday evening sessions and Vacation Bible School. In fact on Sunday evenings each student was to recite from memory a verse starting with the alphabet assigned for that week, and we knew for sure that many would quote John 3:16 on the night the letter "F" was assigned. And, as you all know, I often use this scripture during our communion service.

For a few years, references to the passage seemed to be everywhere. In every end zone, in every crowd, in every place that a television camera was pointing, it seemed as though you would find someone holding up a placard: "John 3:16." This particular trend may have waned a bit—but still it is true: everyone knows John 3:16 or at least knows *of* John 3:16. So, how can we hear these words that are almost too familiar with new understanding? By beginning at verse 14, our text is cut off from its immediate context of Nicodemus' fascinating nocturnal visit to Jesus. What is left is John's allusion to a relatively obscure text from Numbers: Moses lifting up the bronze serpent to protect Israel from the bite of more literal ones underfoot.

For God so loved the world ... It is possible to read the whole of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, as God's love story for the world. It was, after all, love that stirred God's heart at the pleading of the slaves in Egypt, and love that offered them both the guidance of the law and the security of the promised land. Thereafter, whenever inequality or injustice threatened the welfare of the poor and the powerless (and therefore the whole people), God's love raised up prophets who declared God's desire for compassion—shown not just to insiders, but also to sojourners and foreigners within the boundaries of Israel.

It was divine love, stronger than well-deserved judgment, that carried Israel during the time of exile, and the love of God that was celebrated with the psalms of adoration in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. It was God's love that sent Jesus, God's Son, to be incarnate in the world, where he taught that love is not merely for those who look and think and believe like us, but even for our enemies and those who persecute us. It was love that stirred the first-century church to open the doors of communion not only to Jews but also to Gentiles, not only to those deemed worthy but also those whose very existence was troubling: the halt, the lame, the blind, the eunuchs.

Even in our own day, when established powers have sought to limit God's love by the exclusion of others from full participation in the community, divine compassion for the oppressed and divine passion for justice have called forth prophets to declare that God's love includes all, regardless of age or race, nationality or creed, gender or other walls we build to separate us from one another. The cumulative weight of the biblical record and the multifaceted experience of salvation within the contemporary church seem clear: *God so loves the world ...*

This beloved verse says *God so loved the world ...God loved.* This verse does not limit God's love to the insiders, to only believers who walk in the light. This verse imagines a world in which God's love is extended to the oppressed, the outsiders. What if we join in the creation of a community in which God's love is regarded not as being in short supply, open only to those who have seen and confessed Jesus as the Christ, but rather as poured out upon the entire world? If we see this vision, it is precisely because Jesus is the Christ, the sure and confident sign of the very best we know: *God so loves the world ...* **Paul C. Shupe**

I looked up love in the dictionary. The definitions included:

- Affection based on admiration or benevolence
- An assurance of love
- Warm attachment; enthusiasm or devotion
- The objection of such attachment or devotion
- Unselfish concern that freely accepts another in loyalty and seeks his good
- The fatherly concern of God for humans
- Brotherly concern for others
- Human's adoration of God
- The attraction based on sexual desire (the affection and tenderness felt by lovers)
- To hold dear
- To feel a lover's passion, devotion or tenderness

The Greeks have many words for love whether brotherly love, romantic love or God's love for God's creation.

This weekend I experienced love. I was with my sisters and brothers as we experienced a celebration of 4 of my brothers birthday week. However this is not the kind of love that one would give one's life for another.

Being with family reminded me of my parents love for each other that produced twelve children. However this is not the kind of love that one would give one's life for another.

I also was with my son Isaac, and experienced the love of a mother for a child, but again this is not the kind of love that one gives one's life for another.

I also was with Leroy, my husband of 34 years, but again this is not the kind of love that one gives one's life for another.

John 3:16, one of the best-known and best-loved verses in the Bible: "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."

Scripture proclaims that God's extravagant love for the world (*kosmos*) is a self-giving act of grace. God's love for the world and God's giving of the incarnate, crucified, resurrected Son is for all. John's Gospel assures us that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

God's gracious love for creation extends to all, so much so that it was for this kind of love that Jesus was lifted on the cross to die that we might live, making it possible for people to receive the gift of salvation. Persons can choose to accept God's grace through their faith in Christ as Savior. Christ died for all. **Joseph D. Small**