

John 3:1-17

*There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*

*"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

*"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.*

*"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

(Hold up sign saying 3:16).

Does this look familiar? If you have ever watched a major sporting event carefully, you have probably seen it. It can typically be seen behind the goal posts, or the basket, or home plate. You all know what it means, right? Yes, it is a reference to John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." What it really is, is a sound bite that gives the world the answer to our collective and individual struggle, as we go through this life. It is our answer.

We like sound bites. We are, or at least have become, sound bite people. And that is good and not so good. Sound bites are pithy little statements that catch our interest and convey a message. They sink in quickly and are memorable. Ones like: “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn!” Do you remember that one? How about, “I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore”, or “Go ahead. Make my day!” Once they are said, our minds paint for us the rest of the picture from just a simple line of dialogue. Rhett Butler at the door leaving Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*. Judy Garland having landed with Toto in Munchkin Village in *The Oz in Wizard of Oz*. Clint Eastwood as Harry Callahan staring down the barrel of his 44 Magnum in *Dirty Harry*.

But the not so good part is that over time these sound bites of ours can lose their context. What Rhett said to Scarlett becomes about dismissal of a problem, namely Scarlett, instead of a response to her internal battle of insecurity. Dorothy’s statement about not being in Kansas anymore becomes about just being in any strange and different place, instead of recognizing that it was the acknowledgement that launched an epic journey of the discovery of the blessings of home and family. And “Go ahead, make my day” becomes simply a macho, taunting declaration of power, instead of a statement of Harry’s internal struggle and his determination, at any cost and any means, to protect and avenge the victims of violent crime, all because his wife was killed years before by a drunk driver.

And John 3:16 becomes a feel-good statement that kind of gets the world off the hook because of God’s profound love. Here is what many people hear in John 3:16 & 17:

“For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son so that everyone can live eternally with God. He did not come to judge and condemn the world, only to save it.”

Sound about right? I mean, we heard it just a minute ago. Did you hear what I left out; what most people tend to leave out? I left out our part. God so loved the world so *that whoever believes in Him* shall have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved *through Him*.

The sound bite, that we have become so comfortable with, means something different without our part. The context is changed. The covenant, the two-sided agreement, between God and humanity is broken. It becomes a one-sided proclamation that requires nothing of humanity.

So how should we understand our 3:16 sound bite. When we see this sign (hold up 3:16 sign), along with recognizing that God’s Love is doing amazing things within creation for reconciliation, we should understand that it is also making a demand on us and a call to each one of our lives, and collectively on the life of the church.

3:16 is a call to repentance. It should be a reality check for us that it would not have been necessary, God would not have had to save the world, if we had not turned our back on him and tried to take control. 3:16 is a call to surrender the battle we fight for that control and repent of our actions.

And 3:16 is a call to us to follow. It is a call to discipleship. God so loved the world that he sent his Son into the world so that whoever believe in him might find reconciliation with God. Remember here that the “believe” that Jesus is talking about is not simply an intellectual exercise. Jesus is saying that we must be transformed. We must be spiritually reborn, as he told Nicodemus. 3:16 is a call to commitment; commitment to a path and to a new life, within which we will find understanding of all things through our re-connecting with God for eternity, an eternity which BTW starts within this world.

And 3:16 is for us a call to join together. 3:16 is a call to be the church. As we will talk about in the SHIFT study, we are called to be for each other, sacred partners in community on the journey. We are to gather for worship. We are to gather for prayer and spiritual growth. We are to gather for both support and for accountability. We should gather for the joy of fellowship, the peace of unity, and guidance from God. We need to recognize that this is not a journey that we can do alone.

And finally, 3:16 should be a call to us to mission. God so loved the world that He sent His Only Son to teach, love, rebuke, feed, cry, celebrate, die, and rise, so that each person and all people might follow Him back into the arms of God. Knowing that, how can we not take that message to the world. How can we not show that way to our families, and our friends, and the waitress and the busboy at the restaurant we next eat in? In joining in God’s mission, how can we, as followers of His Son, not also teach, love, rebuke, feed, cry, celebrate, and even die if necessary for those who are still unaware of the amazing gift that is being offered to them by God. That is the mission that we are called to.

And that is exactly what we will be considering in the SHIFT study that began this past week. We are more than members of an organization. We are disciples. We are not here to simply build an organization. We are here to embrace God’s mission. We are not here to simply buy a product and service. We are here as Sacred Partners bound together to grow spiritually and serve others faithfully.

I hope that the next time we see this sign up in the stands, we will remember both the love it proclaims as well as the call it makes.

Amen