

## “FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...”

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
Stanford Memorial Church  
March 16, 2014

John 3:16 may be the most famous verse in the Bible. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature.”<sup>i</sup> Hiesman trophy winner Tim Tebow has had it printed in the black shade he has under his eyes in football games, widely photographed in playoffs and championships in college and the pros. In-N-Out Burger puts it on the bottom rim of their coffee cups.<sup>ii</sup> It’s been used as song titles, on banners at various sporting events, and in various unexpected places all the time. It always seems to be popping up somewhere.

I memorized it as a child in Sunday School in the King James translation: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Then I was taught what those words supposedly meant: “God the Father sent himself, as part of the Holy Trinity, in the human person of his Son Jesus, down to earth to be crucified as an sacrifice for the sins of the world. If we proclaim our personal belief in Jesus as God and in his sacrifice for us, then we’ll individually be saved and go to heaven after we die. If not, we’ll go to the everlasting fires of hell. Oh, and by the way, God has only one Son. If you believe in anyone else as Godlike, you’ll go to hell.”

That may sound a bit naïve or inelegant, since I was just a child then. So, in preparation for this sermon, I went back to read about this verse in the main Protestant commentary on the Bible that ministers used when I was a child in the 1950’s. It’s called *The Interpreter’s Bible*, published by Abingdon Press in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1952. Here’s the

more sophisticated, scholarly form of interpretation in that commentary: We must “believe in Jesus Christ and all for which he stands... [I]t is a grave thing to meet Jesus Christ. For we can never again be what we were before: better, please God, far better; but if not, then certainly worse, far worse. For no one can push past Christ or pretend not to see him. But each must stand, must listen, must make up his mind, must give some answer... Either they accept his promises and claims, or hardening their faces, look him squarely in the eye and answer, ‘I will not!’ And so doing, they pass judgment on themselves... ‘Man is free to choose torment without God rather than happiness in God; he has a right to hell, as it were.’”<sup>iii</sup>

One of our church youth group activities back in the 1950’s was washing cars to raise money to send missionaries to India. I asked my teacher one Sunday if Hindus could be saved and go to heaven if our Presbyterian missionaries never got to them to tell them about Jesus. She said, “We’re not God and don’t know what he [and it was definitely “he”] will do with those who’ve never heard of Jesus. But he’s a gracious and loving God and he might well accept them into heaven. But as for those who’ve heard of Jesus and refuse to believe in him uniquely as God and as their Lord and Savior, they’ll definitely go to hell.” I immediately responded, “Then I won’t wash another car!” When she asked why not, I explained that it didn’t seem likely that many of the Hindus who met our Christian missionaries would convert to Christianity, given their own personal and family histories and their culture. Say it was 5% or even 10%. If they’d never heard of Jesus, they might go to heaven by the love and graciousness of God. But if our missionaries got to them, they’d be condemning 90-95% of them to hell. I wasn’t going to raise any more money to do that.

I wasn’t reading *The Interpreter’s Bible* at that age – I’d never heard of it – but when I looked at it last week, I was flabbergasted to see this exposition, right there in the text: It

actually said, in explaining John 3:16, that Hindu India is “a land where... belief is judged to be of no primary consequence. You can be a deist, a pantheist, a theist, the worshiper of an unknowable Absolute, or of a personal deity, or of hundreds of gods, or an agnostic, or an atheist, and still be an orthodox Hindu. That, Hindus claim, is the glory of their faith. And no one will seek to convert you to a better way of thinking...[But] what a man believes is central, radical, fundamental... Even God’s eager grace, stretched to its uttermost, cannot save a soul or a world unless it believes in the Son whom he has sent... [We must be] prepared to stake our all – our life, our soul, our destiny – on the truth of what he says, and do it.”<sup>iv</sup>

Surely, the updated version of the *Interpreter’s Bible*, published in 2003, can’t still be saying this kind of thing, I thought to myself. After all, this is considered a mainstream, if not liberal, commentary -- not a fundamentalist or conservative treatment of scripture. I have a set of the *New Interpreter’s Bible* volumes on my own study shelf, and I often use them in preparing Sunday sermons here. I checked, and sure enough, not a single word that I’ve cited from 1952 still remains. However, the basic interpretation seems to remain the same: “This verse makes clear that there is no middle ground... God’s gift of Jesus, which culminates in Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, decisively alters the options available to the world. If one believes, one’s present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes.... [T]he very presence of Jesus as incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is the moment of judgment. If one believes, one is saved; if one does not believe, one condemns oneself.”<sup>v</sup>

Well, this isn’t what Pope Francis is saying these days. During a Wednesday homily he explained, “The Lord created us in His image and likeness... and He does good and all of us

have this commandment at heart: do good and do not do evil. All of us. The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us... all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! ‘Father, the atheists?’ Even the atheists. Everyone!"... We must meet one another doing good. ‘But I don’t believe, Father, I am an atheist!’ But do good: we will meet one another there.”<sup>vi</sup> The traditional view of John 3:16 also isn’t the way a number of current Protestant biblical scholars, like Marcus Borg and Rebecca Ann Parker see it.

Both of them make clear that John 3:16 has nothing to do with a theology of sacrificial atonement, of exclusivity about Jesus’ spirituality in comparison to others, about belief in terms of assent to certain truth claims, or about heaven and hell. As Rebecca Parker and her co-author Rita Brock translate the verse from the original Greek in their book *Saving Paradise*,<sup>vii</sup> it reads this way: “For God so generously loved the world that he placed his only Son here, so that everyone who has confidence in him may not be lost ... but may have eternal life.” Death is mentioned nowhere in the verse, in fact. Life and love are in the forefront. There’s nothing about a sacrificial death of Jesus here or about his atoning for the sins of humanity. The Greek word shouldn’t be translated as “gave his Son.” When what’s meant is being handed over to death, as in the story of Jesus and Pilate, a completely different Greek word for “gave” is used. Here it means that God has come into our present life in the world through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We come fully alive in the image of God by understanding Jesus’ earthly teachings and acting as he did. Also, the Greek word for eternal has nothing to do with duration of time but instead with an ongoing quality of current experience. That is, eternal life is “an integral, even if not fully [present] quality of the here and now, to be experienced now, called to be preserved now and passed on to others.”<sup>viii</sup>

Eternal life for the early Christians who wrote the gospels was about a quality of love in the world – how God loved the world, how we are called to do so in the same unconditional way, how we are to live fully in human community with eyes to see, ears to hear, and minds to understand what Jesus showed us we should be and do.

"Love one another as I have loved you,"<sup>xix</sup> is how the gospel writer John quotes Jesus. That means being a good shepherd to the lost just as much if not more as to those who are already in the fold.<sup>x</sup> That means saving the life of an adulterous woman who the crowd is calling upon to be stoned according to the law of Moses, ultimately telling the woman "I do not condemn you."<sup>xi</sup> That means giving water, not only physical water from a well but also figuratively the water of eternal life to a hated foreigner, a Samaritan woman, who's not a member of Jesus's own religion.<sup>xii</sup> That means healing all kinds of people in apparent violation of the law of the Sabbath – the blind, lame, paralyzed, and ill.<sup>xiii</sup> That means feeding five thousand near the Sea of Galilee, regardless of whether they are followers of Jesus or not.<sup>xiv</sup>

Psalm 121, our Old Testament reading today, written at least 500 years before Jesus<sup>xv</sup> is also all about God's unconditional love for the world: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved... The Lord is your shade at your right hand... The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

And here's how Bible scholar Marcus Borg explains John 3:16: *For God so loved the world*: "God loves the divinely created world – not just you and me, not just Christians, not just people, but the whole of creation." *That he gave his only begotten son*: "John's Gospel does

not include the notion of substitutionary sacrifice... How much does God love the world? So much that God was willing to become incarnate in the world.” *That whosoever believes in him:* “In this verse, as in the Bible generally, *believe* does not mean believing theological claims about Jesus, but *loving* Jesus, giving one’s heart, loyalty, fidelity and commitment to Jesus. This is the way into new life.” *Should not perish but have eternal life:* “Eternal life is [not]...a blessed afterlife beyond death, but in John’s Gospel, it is a present experience... [I]ts content is *knowing* God and Jesus. To know God and Jesus in the present is to participate already in the life of the age to come... [T]his verse is not about people going to hell because they don’t believe. It is about the path into life with God now.”<sup>xvi</sup> Amen. And amen.

## BENEDICTION

May the blessing of truth be upon us,

May the power of love direct us and sustain us,

May the peace of this community preserve our going out and our coming in,

From this time forth, until we meet again. AMEN. (Duke T. Gray)

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), Vol. VIII, p. 510.

<sup>ii</sup> “John 3:16 in Pop Culture” (Photo essays), *Time Magazine*  
[http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1870689\\_1823241,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1870689_1823241,00.html)

<sup>iii</sup> *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, pp. 511-513.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511.

<sup>v</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 553.

<sup>vi</sup> Paul, Brandeis Raushenbush, “10 Crucial Days That Shaped Pope Francis' First Year,”

*The Huffington Post*, March 12,

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/12/pope-francis-first-year-\\_n\\_4947983.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/12/pope-francis-first-year-_n_4947983.html)

<sup>vii</sup> See Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of the World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), especially pages 417-420.

<sup>viii</sup> Ron Robinson, “Saving Paradise,” a sermon delivered at the Hope Unitarian Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma (July 13, 2008).

<sup>ix</sup> John 20:1-31; 21:1-25.

<sup>x</sup> John 10: 11-18.

<sup>xi</sup> John 8: 1-11.

<sup>xii</sup> John 4: 1-30.

<sup>xiii</sup> John 5: 1-18; 9:1-17.

<sup>xiv</sup> John 6: 1-14.

<sup>xv</sup> Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 734.

<sup>xvi</sup> Marcus J. Borg, “On John 3:16,” a sermon from *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can be Restored* (New York: HarperOne, 2011). [http://day1.org/2897-dr\\_marcus\\_j\\_borg\\_on\\_john\\_316](http://day1.org/2897-dr_marcus_j_borg_on_john_316)