

The Federated Church of Hyannis
Sermon for April 25, 2021
Reverend Paul R. Adkins
Scripture: John 3: 1-16

The Gospel in Miniature

If you lived in the Bible Belt, this morning's text is the one verse nearly everyone would know by heart. I'm sure most of you know it as well:

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

That, of course, is John 3:16.

Immediately following John 3:16 is a restatement of it in a different form as if to underline or emphasize God's purpose. That verse reads:

For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.

The great reformer Martin Luther referred to John 3:16 as the gospel in miniature. That is, it contains the essence of Christian faith.

And what is that essence?

Simply this – that God loves the world beyond measure. We need only to look at some of the particulars of the text to see this.

To begin with, the text speaks of the magnitude of God's love.

For God so loved the world. It is not that God loved the world, but that he so loved. The little word *so* makes all the difference. Listen to how the text sounds without it. *For God loved the world.* The message is still intact, but not to the same degree.

God so loved the world. Here the message does not merely unfold, but rather erupts with magnificent intensity and unmistakable force, revealing the magnitude of God's love.

*As Arthur Pink reports in his commentary on the Gospel of John, *None can define or measure that little word "so". There are dimensions to the breadth, the length and depth and height of his wondrous love that none can measure.*

In addition to the magnitude of Gods love, the text speaks of the time of Gods love.

God so loved the world. It is not only that he loves us now, but that he loved us all along. God gave his love freely and unconditionally from the start. As St Paul wrote to the Romans, “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”. When humanity did nothing to earn or deserve it or win it, God loved us anyway.

Further, let us notice that the text speaks of the extent of God’s love.

God so loved the world. Not just a part of it, not just a select few, but the entire world. The new testament Greek word for world used here is *cosmos* – meaning everything and everyone. These three things: the magnitude, the time and the extent of God’s love highlight the point of the text and its theme that God loves the world with an overwhelming love.

If so, we are left to respond, but what shall our response be? The writer of the book of Jude offers what is perhaps the best response of all. In verse 21 of that short, one-chaptered book he urges: “Keep yourselves in the love of God”.

One way to do that is to practice God’s Love.

Through many years of Vacation Bible School children have sung that little song: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”. As adults, we may think we are beyond such a simple song, but we need to feel its message. Each day it doesn’t hurt to say to oneself: God loves me. I am worth something. I count. We humans never outgrow our need for love. Even so, one of the greatest tragedies is that many people feel that no one loves them, and no one cares about them. As a result, some turn to drugs or withdraw from life into a hell of their own making. They need to hear the gospel word that God loves them, and that each one of us matters.

* Bernard of Clairvaux, a French monk who lived in the 12th century listed four types of love.

1. Love of self
2. Love of God for what God can give us
3. Love of God for God’s self
4. Love of ourselves through God’s love for us

The fourth – love of ourselves through God's love of us – is the one we desperately need. Love yourself because God loves you. Whether you're young or old, saint or sinner, happy or sad, God loves you!

Say it every morning when you get up – remind yourself of it when times get tough. God loves me, and I matter.

In addition to practicing God's love, a second way to keep ourselves in the love of God is to share it.

We don't always think along these lines, but love is something which must be shared. It does not flourish in isolation. Instead, it grows in relationships of one person to another, of one person to a group, of a person to God. If we want to be loved we need to remember that love is a relationship. It's essential that we make an effort to get outside ourselves.

*The English cleric Leslie Weatherhead told about a woman named Edith who made no effort to reach out to others, but lived entirely unto herself. Weatherhead described her by saying that: *Edith is a small island bound on the north on the south on the east and on the west by Edith.* (The Key Next Door, p. 38)

Caring is a two-way street. To whatever degree we can, be it large or small, we need to reach out to one another in love and friendship.

But – and this may be the most important thing of all, - if we want to keep ourselves in the love of God, we need to remind ourselves that love is the greatest thing in the world.

Remembering the ringing words of St Paul when he declared that:

Neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord..

His love arches over all, and because of it nothing is impossible and the future is always open.

Dr Gardner Taylor, pastor of the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn for many years told about a conversation between the president of a Louisiana bank and his black gardener which happened in the early days of the civil rights movement. "John", the banker said to the black man one day, "you people are always fooling around with the NAACP and other things. Don't you know you'll never change

things? You don't have anyone in the legislature. You don't have any power. You don't have any money. You'll never do it". The old black gardener looked up and with a knowing voice replied, "Suppose God says so".

You see, God's love means that the future is open, for when he stirs the hearts of his people, kingdoms wane and fall. The love of Christ turned the world upside down in the first century, and the same force is still at work in our day and in our lives if we keep plugged into it. Unfortunately, we easily fall out of touch with God's love. Each time we give up on our future or surrender the present, we deny His love and its power to make all things new. Each time we let ourselves be consumed with doubt or give way to feelings of worthlessness we deny his love.

Of course, none of us can avoid doing these things at one time or another. But when we do, it is important to remind ourselves that God doesn't really want us that way. God wants us to feel His love around us and under us and to know, as the writer of an old gospel anthem we used to sing in my home church puts it –

*The love of God is greater far
Than pen or ink can ever tell
It goes beyond the highest start
And reaches to the lowest hell.*

Ah, how grand a thing the love of God is. It stretches beyond the boundaries of our imaginations and helps us when we most need it. God's love is a source of strength. It is the very nature of God, for God is love.

A Sunday School kindergarten teacher once instructed her class: "Say God is love after me." And in unison the children called out "God is love after me". Therein is the gospel. God is love after you and me. His love was shown most powerfully through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our lord. He was love incarnate and He lived a life of love so that we, too, might live. In spite of all the heartache and sorrow that mixes into the beauty and wonder of life, the essence of faith is to believe that God's love is the center of all things.

Luther was right when he said that John 3:16 and its message that "God so loved the world" was the gospel in miniature. **Amen.**