

Marquand Chapel
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John 3:16-17

16 '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. 17 '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.

Everyone reads the Bible differently. Each person who approaches the text brings her own assumption, his own experience, her own traditions of interpretation. For some of us there are passages of the Bible that we can no longer hear read without crying because they were read at the funeral of a loved one. For others of us these same passages have fed and nourished our spiritual life for the past five—or fifty—years. For still others, the passages make us angry because they have historically been used to justify oppression. People read the Bible as the church's book, as the literal word of God, as an interesting historical document. Some people, like C.S. Lewis or Lee Strobel, started reading the Bible as an interesting historical document... and found it so compelling that they came to an understanding of Christian faith from it. Some people have had the opposite experience.

One way to facilitate discussion of Biblical texts is to have a common base from which to start. This is one thing the Bible faculty teaches us—in our classes we do not talk about a text until we are all reading the same text using the same technique. This is the crucial purpose that the historical critical method serves at this institution; *it allows us all to speak about the Bible using a common language*. This way we all know the terms to use and we know what they mean in this context.

Each of us comes from traditions in which there are assumed or explicit sets of rules for how to talk about Scripture. The community that worships here in Marquand has our own set of rules also. They can be found in the Marquand Chapel guidelines, which are in the Student Handbooks that were put in your mailboxes at the beginning of the school year. They begin—quote—Christian Worship is about meeting God in scripture—and they continue with the specific aspects of our worship, including our use of scripture.

Once a technique of biblical interpretation is understood by each conversation partner, dialogue about a text may begin. In today's dialogue, all that remains after choosing a language of interpretation is to select a text to discuss.

Well, how about the most well-known verse in the Christian Bible? John 3:16. *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.*

When I was growing up, I attended more Christian education experiences than you could shake a stick at. There was Baptist Bible School once a week, Lutheran Sunday School while my parents were in worship, and many different summer Vacation Bible School programs, at church camp or at my grandparents' Methodist church or at my home congregation. Let me tell you, I

memorized more Bible verses in those years than I could ever recall today. John 3:16 was, of course, the first verse that we learned in every setting. It is the most frequently used verse in all Christianity; it's the one that people hold up on signs at football games.

By looking at the ways the words in this verse are used, we can deduce a few things about what it means. John 3:16 tells us that the world—humanity—has two alternative ultimate destinies—eternal life or perishing. These alternatives are presented as opposites. They are also described as opposites again later in John's Gospel, in chapter 6. The default setting for human destiny, it would seem, is perishing. This is the alternative which would occur *if God did not love the world*. But some humans believe in a person called the Son. This Son was both given and sent to humanity; much like the Paraclete will be both given and sent later, in John chapter 14. Those people who believe in the Son are saved from perishing and brought to eternal life.

This is good news, right! Good news for those who believe. To some people, though, good news for those who believe is not good news at all. Good news for those who believe is bad news for those who do not believe. Bad news for anyone is not good news.

When I was memorizing all those Bible verses as a child, John 3:16 somehow sounded a little bit like works righteousness. All right, I wouldn't have used that phrase when I was eight. But it sounds as though we have to do something—we have to believe—and then we earn eternal life. John 3:17 was conveniently left out of the curriculum of my Christian education experiences. I suppose that the teachers thought talk about condemnation was a little too much for children, or maybe an additional verse just would have made the passage too long. So let's look at John 3:17 now.

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.

When I was confirmed at age 14, my pastor gave me a bookmark with both these verses on it. Prior to my confirmation, I had not bothered to look past the verse that I had memorized to see what the verse might be saying in its narrative context. All of a sudden, I felt like I had discovered a whole new nuance to the Biblical witness. I kept reading chapter 3 of John to learn about light and darkness. The Son is the light, and the Son came into the world, but the world ignored him. Yet, as John 1:5 says, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The evil deeds of humanity cannot overshadow the salvation brought by the Son.

Taken in this context, John 3:16 does not sound like works righteousness. Rather than threatening that everyone will perish unless they believe, John chapter 3 says that we are already condemned by our own actions—but the Son came to save all of us. Rather than saying that we must do something to be saved, this passage tells us that we have already done something to be condemned. All humanity stands condemned. John 3:19 and 20 remind us that we hate the light and do evil deeds. We hide from the light in order that our deeds may not be exposed. Well, Here, John exposes our deeds.

And in the light of the knowledge that we ought to be condemned, the fact that we can be saved is good news indeed! We are not saved because we can do something to earn salvation—we are saved because we have done something to earn condemnation, and God, who loves us so much, can't stand to see us condemned.

Those people holding signs at football games should write “John 3:16-17,” or better yet, just John 3.

Some words keep recurring here. Salvation. Condemnation. Eternal life. The question arises as to when this condemnation or salvation will occur. When we talk about the options of perishing or entering eternal life, it becomes clear that we are talking about what happens after we die. The word translated here as “condemnation” can also mean simply, “judgment.” So, when does humanity face condemnation? On the judgment day. After we have died. These verses make us face death. In facing our death, our humanity is emphasized.

Our mortality stands in contrast to *God’s* immortality.

Our imperfections and unrighteousness stand in contrast to *God’s* great love.

Our inability to save ourselves stands in contrast to *God’s* salvation.

Our humanity reminds us further that we as creatures have the need of the Creator’s saving grace, which is offered through the Son.

At least, that is how I read it.

Even the most common sentences in Scripture can have multiple faithful readings. Due to the seemingly endless variations of biblical interpretation, I have tried to boil down these verses to their most simple meaning.

- (1) God does not come in to this world to condemn the world.
- (2) God does come in to this world to save the world.
- (3) This saving happens through the Son.

This is good news for all people! This is why John 3:16 continues to be the most well-known verse in the Bible. Read in its narrative context, it can summarize for us the whole of the Gospel... and the whole of our meaning as created beings. Taken together, these verses can give us hope.

Today we recall the lives of people who have gone before us. We remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the anniversary of his birth. We remember YDS alum and Gospel Choir director Jason Richardson on the anniversary of his death. We remember those whom we have loved dearly—parents, grandparents, friends, and others—those of whom we cannot pass through a single day without thinking of their impact on our lives. We remember, and we have hope. We have hope because God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but in order to have the world saved through him.

Amen.