

John 3:14-21

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

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.

3:17 "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.

3:18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

3:19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

3:20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

3:21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Lenten Reflection: Whosoever
Bob Stillerman
Fourth Sunday of Lent, 3/10/2024
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For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

For God so loved the world.

God, the source of all life.

God *loved*, that is had deep and abiding affection for. Actually, God *SO loved*. God loved with an extra umph. Authentic, intense, dynamic, full love.

For God *SO loved the world*. Not the first world, not the developing world, not a portion of the world. But *THE* entire world. That's everything that you and me can conjure – the entire creation that surrounds us, ourselves included!

God, the source of all life, loved, loves, and will keep on loving everything, and every place, and everybody that lives.

For God so loved the world *that he gave his only son*.

John's prelude tells us – this son, this word, this substance has always been with God. Ever since the beginning. God loved humanity so much, God gave something of Godself to the world. God manifested in the person of Jesus and experienced all that we know and feel.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, *so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*

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God lived and acted in such a way – Gove loved and God gave, in order that *everyone*...E-V-E-R-Y-O-N-E...

The King James say whosoever. I'd add whensoever, whatsoever, wheresoever, and howsoever...Everyone who believes.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who *believes* – not documents, not mimics, not regurgitates, not those coerced, not those shamed, not those shoehorned – believes; Everyone who experiences for themselves the source of all life, loving all life, in shared humanity, may not *perish*.

The believer *shall not perish*. They shall not rot, they shall not atrophy, they shall not experience lifelessness, they shall not live in a perpetual state of blah.

The believer shall experience *eternal life* – that is they shall know a communion with God that transcends the physical. They shall know the substance of God. They shall know a love that never ends and a light that is never extinguished by God.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

This is a verse of unlimited possibilities. Why, why, why, then, do so many insist this is a conditional statement?!?

It's not in question, as a matter of fact, it's NEVER been, that God loves the world, the whole of it. Even, especially those who don't have compassion, empathy, or awareness for creation or for God.

God loves in order to offer access to God's communion. And there's no mention of deadline. It doesn't say for all who believe or experience by April 15th. And there's no mention of manner. It's doesn't say for all who believe by doing X, Y, or Z. And it doesn't condemn. God didn't send Jesus to scare us into salvation. God sends Jesus to remind us that God endures life with us.

Don't force an urgency and a preciseness that has never resided in this text. Rainbow Man – he's that dude that used to wear a rainbow wig and crazy suspenders, and show up at every major sporting event with a poster reading John 3:16 – Rainbow Man can seek to make this a transaction all he wants. But it ain't, and it won't ever be. God doesn't have a stopwatch on us. We aren't some cold call to close so God can move on to the next customer. We aren't a vote to be counted, or a quota to be met.

God is inviting us into a relationship in the spaces and at the paces that work for us. God is a source with a whole lot more humility and patience and creativity than any of us possess. God's ready when we are, and even when we aren't.

John's gospel is a series of stories that reveal truth in new ways. It's not that God's presence is ever absent from anyone, or anything, or anyplace. Ever. God is ever present! It's that the world is too often oblivious to God's presence. And the world insists that God's presence, and indeed all of the Godstuff can only be present via systemic stipulations and manipulations.

Remember last week? The Temple establishment couldn't, wouldn't imagine the possibilities of God. Jesus tells them, "Hey! I'm here! Yes, I do love you! But you are so distracted by the mechanisms and

marketplaces of corporate worship (and yes, Corrine, not the good kind of corporate in this instance!) that you are missing the whole point of gathering in my Daddy’s house!” God’s presence is here. In communion with Jesus. And they/we missed it. We’re obsessed about a single tree in a forest full of banquet goodness.

Jesus, for us, knocks down all this systemic nonsense. God is with us, y’all. God is able to be experienced. Life – that is the living as we were created and intended to be – is available, and abundant, and even encouraged, right now. And the invitation is in perpetuity.

In John’s gospel, we hear of bread, and deep wells, and even life itself. But our senses are dulled, the message is distorted, the PR machine keeps churning. Didn’t you know? Caesar rations the bread; Caesar’s aqueducts bring water from afar; and when we are born, it’s Caesar that stamps our value: citizen or plebe.

John Gospel reminds us: Moses raised his staff; he had to show the people that provisions could exist beyond Pharoah’s grasp. And in Jesus, John’s community, and indeed every community that follows, is invited to experience the bread of life, and dip their cups into a well full of living water that quinches a different kind of thirst, and into rebirth and renewal. In the presence of Jesus, we stop systemizing and cataloging God, as well as the ways for us to be present with God. And instead, we dare to see God’s presence in the present as a real present or gift to us.

God loves. SO MUCH, y’all! And in this abundance, this free, permanent, ample, and good abundance, is life! Life for everyone!

I want to close with a final thought.

We are entering a tumultuous and worldly season, y'all. And the drama is thick. Forces compete for our attention. At month's end, Easter ought to usher in new life and renewed purpose. A reminder of what God's love infused in us can create. But just as soon as they take the chocolate bunnies off the shelf, and the flowers on our chicken wire cross begin to wither, we'll find ourselves in the middle of a very polarized and partisan series of elections. And it's not lost on me that just about the time we usher in Reign of Christ Sunday, we'll most likely know our new leaders, and by the Season of Epiphany, we'll even inaugurate them.

If last Thursday's speeches are any indication, we live in a nation that is intent on making its love conditional. The safety of our children, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the autonomy of our minds, bodies, and souls – us good Baptists call that soul freedom and Bible freedom; the rights to be, live, and thrive as God created us to be, are all universal desires. That is...until such desires are spoken from tongues different than ours, received in bodies not just like ours, advocated by people whose power and influence threaten our own. It's not enough for each of us to have enough. We need our enough to be more than our neighbors.

Today's text tells us God loves us. Period. Everyone. Whosoever, howsoever, whysoever, whensoever, wheresoever we are. There is life to be had.

As we consider the season ahead, may we also consider our choices. You see, we belong to communities ranging in size from two persons to eight billion. And how we choose to live in our ecosystems is of vital importance. By what means – our voices, our actions, our participation, our silence, our inaction, our expressions

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of love or indifference – by what means will we choose to proclaim the God for everyone, whosoever, howsoever, whysoever, whensoever, wheresoever they are?

Will we choose to do what is good and be what is good at the risk of falling out of good graces? Will we choose to love commodities, or will we recognize God’s love as something more than a commodity, as the only necessity? Will we pursue the lifelessness of self-righteousness, or will we live, emboldened by God’s righteousness?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that She mothered every child, so that everyone, EVERYONE, who experiences the Godstuff may live, and live abundantly.

For God so loved the world, that we, moved by God’s love, loved the world back.

May it be so! And may it be soon!

Amen.