

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 3:1-17

"God So Loves"

We are starting today a little theology: nothing frightening, just a close look at some basic Christian ideas. We'll do it by "unpacking" a few well-known verses in the Bible, to see if we truly understand them. So whether you are a long-time believer, a skeptic, confused about Christianity altogether, a newcomer to this church, or someone still trying to make sense of Protestant Evangelical beliefs after being brought up some other way, I hope there will be something here for you. And even for those of us who think "we know all this stuff already," I think there are some ways of deepening our faith and understanding.

I'm starting with the best-know verse in the New Testament: John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* Today we are going to focus on just the words in the opening clause that gives the reason for the main statement "God gave his Son" - namely *God, so loves, and the world.*

1) *God*

Who is this God? What do we know about him? What difference does it make on Long Island, NY in the 21st century?

First, this is the God who made all that there is. Why is there something rather than nothing? God did it, and still does it. The

reason we are here this morning is that God created and sustains all that is. Take away God, and there is nothing left. What he has made is ordered, beautiful, splendid, hospitable; "very good" the book of Genesis says were God's words about it! Every time we look at the Sound or the Bay or the Ocean; when we look at the mountains or the sunset or deep space seen through the Hubble telescope, we know that a great and creative mind is behind it all.

This God is the source of life. You and I are here today because he gave us life and sustains it day by day. It is a wonderful thing to be alive, and to be human. The Bible says we somehow reflect something of God in our persons - we are *"made in his image"* - rational, moral, loving, creative, able to worship, able to understand God's creation. Does any of this "ring bells" for you? Do you wake up thankful for another day of living and loving and working and wondering? When you see beauty in nature or in another person, what do you do with your emotions? Who do you thank?

God is the ruler of all things - he is powerful enough and wise enough to hold everything under his control. Nations rise and fall, people are born and die, sunshine and rain fall. God knows when a sparrow falls to the ground, and the number of hairs on your head. Nothing escapes his notice, nothing escapes his care, nothing escapes his control.

Even when everything seems totally out of our control, nothing surprises him or disturbs his plans. Do you know that? Do you believe “your times are in his hands”? Do you know deep in your heart that he is working out his plan for you every single day, and that it is a good plan? Do you have that “invisible means of support” (as one of my friend used to call it) that enables you to keep going when everyone else is frantic and raving? Do you know God that governs your life and his world wisely, lovingly, powerfully? If not, how do you make it through the day?

Do you know that this God is the source of all that is good – that all our sense of right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice, comes from him and reaches us through the way he has made us? Do you know that he has also sent us clear messages about what is good and evil? Do you know he is the moral arbiter of the world? If not, where do you get your ideas of right and wrong? From what 51% of your friends think? If that’s the only place we get our values, God help us if we find ourselves living in a society that values human life cheaply, or has no respect for property, or for marriage, or for family. Shall we just adopt our community’s values, or do we all wish there was common ground that we could all agree on?

Do you know that this creative, life-giving, powerful moral God is also a “Father-figure” who you can relate to as a person? Do you know that he is devastated by the mess people have made of his world; that he cannot stand this viral infection that has circled the globe, an infection that people die from every day, that newborns seem to acquire immediately, that has polluted our families, our marriages, our politics, our air and water? No, it’s not HIV or SARS or bird-flu, it’s called sin. Do you know that he weeps over its effects on innocent people and

communities and nations? Do you know it saddens him even more than it does you and me? And do you know what he has done and is doing about it?

Do you know God? Do I? Not just know *about* God, but know him as a person? Did you know that was even possible? Do you speak to him every day? Does he speak to you? If your answers to all these kinds of questions are “I don’t know what you’re talking about;” if you say “Well, I don’t believe half of that,” then I can only say that you are at best “half-way to being a Christian,” because these are basic things about God that Christians have believed for 2000 years, despite all the revisionism you can encounter today! Do you know this God? If not, then start reading his book of self-revelation – the Bible – seriously reading it, with an open heart and open mind that is ready to accept the truth when you find it, and be ready to meet God when he steps out of these pages and speaks to you!

2) *Loves*

Ok – so let’s move on to something simpler: God *loved*, or *loves*. Everyone knows what love means, right? Except that English, for all the glories of its literature and poetry, sometimes is short on vocabulary. I love my wife, I love my sons, I love my dogs, I love peach ice cream, I love Long Island, I love America, I love this church, I love my friends. All those loves are different, are expressed in different ways, evoke different emotions, require different amounts of attention, and are probably are wired in different parts of my brain! So what does it mean to read the English sentence that starts “*God loves...*”? The Bible also tells us that “*God is love,*” which doesn’t immediately make sense in English either!

God first revealed himself in detail in the Hebrew language, which like English mostly

uses one word to describe a lot of different "loves." Greek, the language of the New Testament, does better, and as I'm sure you know, there are three common Greek words for "loving" – one deals with erotic or passionate affection, another with friendship and duty, and a third for unconditional and sacrificial concern for the welfare of another person. Guess which one is in John 3:16? Of course, it is the third: when God loves he does so with a faithful, active, honoring, caring, covenant-bound, timeless, feely chosen devotion to the welfare of the people he loves.

This is not a love associated with warm feelings of affection, but with doing the best that can be done for someone else. This is how God loves people – his love is unconditional, sacrificial, unchanging. Do you know that? That his love for you does *not* depend on the weather, or the date, or where you were born or where you live or where you work, or what education you have, or whether you're married or divorced or single or living with someone? That it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, or what you are doing now; whether you are a newcomer to faith or have lived it forever – that none of that affects how God loves you?

That once God has chosen to love you, nothing stops him – not your behavior, not how often you confess your sins, or don't; not how often you pray, not how much you give to the church, not how kind you are to other people. (He may have things he'd like to say to you about any or all of those matters, but they will never change how he *loves* you!). His love is not affected by your situation – even if (as Julie Lutz quoted the Apostle Paul three weeks ago) you are "*in trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger... neither in death nor life, in the present or the future... nothing can separate us from the*

love of God." Or in the emphatic but simple words of John's Gospel, God "*so loved...*"

Do you know his love, right down inside where it matters? Because once God loves, he never ever gives up, no matter what – because he does not have a warm emotional feeling toward you, but a steadfast devotion to your welfare. And just as good parents never stop loving their children, no matter how they are saddened by their behavior or attitudes, so God our Father loves now, has always loved, and always will.

3) *The World*

So of course the crucial question is "who does God love?" And the answer is "*the world.*" Now we're back in deep water again: what does *that* mean?

If you read your Bible, you already know it uses the word "world" in many different senses: the whole creation (the universe, we might call it), the planet we live on, here and not heaven, people and angels, humankind, the joys and cares of human life. But many times in the New Testament, it has a strong negative connotation, and means "all that is opposed to God." This is the "world" that is "under the control of the devil," that Christians "should not love the things of," that God's people should stay "unstained by." This is the world of God's fallen and rebellious humanity, the people infected by sin, immersed in evil, and deeply and instinctively opposed to God. It's not that they "*don't believe in God;*" it's that they *don't like him*. You know what I mean, I am sure. You or someone in your family lives there: can't get rid of God, but keeps fighting against him.

"*God so loves the world*"? Yes. It is exactly this conspiracy of opposition to him that God loves, will not give up on, will not abandon to its own ruin, will not write off as a loss,

will not wipe off the face of the earth with another Noah-like catastrophe. God loves *the world* and wants to see it fixed, to see it rescued, restored, made new and good and beautiful! God *so loves* this lost world that he will do anything to save it.

Christians are called not to be such a part of the anti-God world that we “love it” (emotionally and passionately), but we are supposed to work with God for the world’s welfare and ultimate redemption. So Christians are called by Jesus to be “*in the world but not of the world*” – it can’t be saved from a distance, God and we have to be in it; but just as Jesus’ promised kingdom was not “*of this world,*” neither are his disciples to be “*of this world.*”

What do you love most? What do I? The down-side of “the world”? Or the hope of seeing all the broken people restored? God has acted, and we are now called to act for him and with him, to renew our cultures, our communities, our churches, our families, ourselves until they are as “very good” as they were designed to be.

“God so loved – and still loves – the world...”
that – what? God so loved that he did, and does, what? We shall see next week. I hope you will be here.

Let us pray...