

“The Gospel in a Nutshell”

John 3:16, Lent Sunday 2-A

March 12, 2017

Most every believer, I imagine, has a favorite Bible verse or two that they treasure and that they could gladly share with others! But if you were asked to identify that **one, single, solitary Bible verse—that could “pretty well”—sum up—the whole message of the Bible—to which Bible verse would you turn?**

For centuries now, there have been **many formidable Bible scholars that would point us to that second-to-last verse of our Gospel lesson today!** In his native German tongue, Martin Luther once referred to this passage of **John 3:16**, as: **“Das Evangelium in der Nusschale!”** It’s a phrase that, translated into English, means: **“The Gospel in a Nutshell!”**

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life!”

Brothers and sisters, I am hoping that we might spend some time this morning centering our discussion of this great Bible passage around six words only: **“God loved!” “God gave!” “God promised!”**

I. “God Loved”

This is one of the **greatest spiritual truths presented to us in the Holy Bible** about God - **the fact that he loves us.** And in **John 3:16**, the Apostle John is reminding us here that **he loves us all indiscriminately.**

- Our God certainly loves **more than just the people of one nation.**
- Our God loves **more than just those people** who **love him in return.**
- Our God also loves those people whom **we might label as “unlovable.”**

Therefore, the Fourth Century Church Father, St. Augustine, one day said: **“God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love!”**

Brothers and sisters this great Biblical truth has also been expounded upon further for us by St. John in his first epistle, when he tells us: **“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave up his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (John 4:10-11)!”**

While God is love, St. John reminds us here—that there is something God still must do for us, if we are to genuinely become the recipients of God’s love—and this is—that God himself must give us a second-birth into the kingdom of God!

As Jesus tells Nicodemus in our Gospel lesson this morning — ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God!”***

Quite naturally, Nicodemus is very puzzled: ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter for a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”***

This account of Nicodemus’ conversation with Jesus in John 3 is the **most highly developed dialogue in all the Gospels between Jesus and a named individual.**

How strange it is that a member of **“Who’s Who in Jerusalem”** would seek out Jesus, who some people believed initially to be nothing more than—a **rustic, radical itinerant preacher. Jesus was usually surrounded by ordinary folks, but here we see him with a real aristocrat.** Nicodemus very respectfully called Jesus **“Rabbi”** and sought to compliment him. But Jesus quickly cut to the bottom line. He said, ***“No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again.”***

“What?” asked Nicodemus.

It reminds me of the pastor who was delivering a children’s sermon one day about Jesus curing lepers. He tried to teach the children what the disease of leprosy was. One of the symptoms was itching. Therefore, the pastor asked the children gathered before him: “Have any of you ever had chickenpox?” -- One little boy said, “No sir, but I’ve had Chicken McNuggets!”

NICODEMUS AND JESUS STARTED OFF WITH THIS LEVEL OF MISCOMMUNICATION.

For all the teachings of the Bible that we Christians agree upon, there has always some disagreement among believers about “how” a person is born again into the kingdom of God! And perhaps, this is due in part to the fact that when we read the book of Acts---some adults hear the Word of God preached to them, confess their sins and then are baptized, **but there are also places in the book of Acts—when we read of adults who have come to faith through the “preached” Word whose children are baptized right alongside of them on the very day that they are baptized.**

Take for example, the jailer of the prison in Philippi, who called out to St. Paul and to Silas, ***“Sirs, what must we do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the Word of God to them and all who were in his house. And he took them (Paul and Silas) the same hour of the night and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, he and all his family” (Acts 16:30-33)!***

II. “God Gave!”

And the fact that God gave his only-begotten Son to become the **Savior of the whole human race**—becomes abundantly clear to us in the words of our Old Testament lesson today—where God forges a Covenant with Abram—and promises Abraham—through his seed, through his descendants—that one day: **“All the families of the earth would one day be blessed” (Genesis 12:3)!**

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you! And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you shall all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3)!

“ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH” is the phrase in our **Old Testament lesson** today that is completely **synonymous** with that word **“COSMOS,”** or **“WORLD”** as St. John is using it for us in our Gospel lesson today!

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON... God’s love for the people of this earth has always been and always remains an **“UNCONDITIONAL”** kind of love. When God adopted the people of Israel to be his very own people it wasn’t because of what was in their hearts---but solely because of what was in his heart.

Someone has pointed out, therefore, that Deuteronomy 7:7 is to the Old Testament what John 3:16 is to the New Testament. Let me share with you Deuteronomy 7:7 -- **“The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping an oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt!”**

Yes, God revealed himself to Abraham and the other patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob! Yes, God revealed himself to the people of Israel through the Covenant he made with them through Moses at Mount Sinai. Yes, God revealed himself to the people of Israel through the judges he appointed to rule over his people and then through the kings and the prophets.

Finally, the opening verses of Hebrews in the New Testament tell us: **“In many and various ways, God spoke to our fathers of old, but in the last days he has spoken to us through his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the**

reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful Word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:1-3)!

III. **"God Promised!"**

The promise of God is contained for us in this one phrase that closes out this verse for us like a mighty crescendo: **"That whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life!"** -- This is quite an astounding promise that God is making to us, isn't it, my brothers and sisters – the promise of everlasting life!

Unfortunately, however, sometimes we are far too minimalistic when we confine our thinking about **"eternal life"** as something that will only happen for us one day after we have died a physical death and after we have been buried; some time, long after our **dead bodies have lain for many years in our graves, as some folks used to say, "PUSHING UP DAISIES."**

But St. John tells us that eternal life is something is that we, by the grace of God may enjoy already now! It's to receive the forgiveness of our sins and to know what it means to live out our lives in this world as those who have been made members of the kingdom of God.

But consider all the abundant evidence surrounding us all throughout the world today – in evidence – that the One who was put to death for our transgressions has been raised again for our justification (Romans 4:25)!

Brothers and sisters, let's not forget that on the day after Jesus' death, it looked as if whatever **small mark he left on the world would rapidly disappear.** But instead, his impact on human history has been **unparalleled.**

It is also a well-known fact of history that most peoples' influence and impact upon this world begins to decline as soon as they die! If they do leave a great legacy, it's only because they already had developed an enormous reputation! But Jesus' life and death were different! On the Friday Jesus died his **movement appeared to have failed. His followers were scattered.** They were so scared they shrouded themselves away from society behind locked doors in secret hiding places.

Besides, if there was ever a kind of **"MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED POSTHUMOUSLY"** award given on the day of death to history's most influential people, Jesus would have come in dead last. **Consider what would be in the minds of many modern people today as a list of his Good Friday's failures: Jesus died broke. Jesus died homeless and all alone.** Jesus never married and had no children. He never attended college. He never wrote a book.

He never commanded an army. He never succeeded in business. And he never was elected to any kind of public office; not once, not ever! Jesus never did anything like political leaders often seek to do today to ensure their own legacy. There are no original paintings of Jesus. Or statues. Or busts. He personally never had anything named after himself.

In short, on the day when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ died, he had never achieved any of the things that people associate with success, greatness and lasting fame today.

Yet, three days later things began to change. Quickly. Uniquely. And dramatically. Jesus arose from the grave! He overcame death. Defeated the devil. And resurrected hope in His dispirited disciples. There's no denying it! Witnesses confirm it. History records it. And changed lives demonstrate it. His name and message began to be preached 50 days later.

First at Jerusalem. Then in Judea and then in Samaria and eventually throughout the whole Roman empire. All kinds of people were converted to faith in him who claimed that in doing so they ended up giving their whole lives over to him. Men and women discovered a sense of equality in Christ. Jews and Gentiles were joined together as one. Masters and slaves became spiritual peers. Even Jesus' most ardent enemy, Saul of Tarsus, turned from being a persecutor to a proclaimer of Jesus!

Today every facet of our lives is impacted by Jesus. Art. Literature. History. Poetry. Sculpture. Theater. And even movies! His name has influenced the names of our hospitals. Towns. And missions. Libraries are filled with books about Him. Museums display artifacts relating to His era. The influence of the Son of Man is Everywhere!

Still today through Christ's Word and the preaching of His Gospel He is ever-present. Probing our souls. Touching our hearts. Calling out to our consciences. And He is coming back again to receive the redeemed and take them back to His home in heaven. Indeed, He is the Man who won't go away!

And why? All because God loved, God gave, and God promised! "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life!" AMEN