

“John 3:16: Love = Giving; Believing = Eternal Life”

Sermon Notes for Lent 4B, March 18, 2012, Episcopal Church of Epiphany, 2602 Gilmer Avenue, Tallahassee, AL 36078 by the Rev. Arnold A. Bush, Priest in Charge

Text: Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Summary: We have heard the verse John 3:16 many times in our lives, but have we really lived into the TRUTHS revealed?

Introduction

Here is a trivia question: When watching an NFL or college football game on TV and seeing some printed sign held up by fans--what was on that printed sign? Go Tigers, Roll Tide, Go Dawgs, etc. Ever seen the Bible verse on Tim Tebow's cheek? Go Gators or Go Broncos? No, it is John 3:16. Sometimes scholars have said this is the summary of the Gospel of Christ. Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic monk in Germany, helped initiate the Protestant Reformation by nailing the 95 theses on the door of the church. Tradition has it that that he claimed John 3:16 was the summary of the Gospel. Two weeks ago I was in the Cokesbury bookstore and noticed a recent book with the title John 3:16 by a person who has published many Christian books.

In diagramming the verse, I have come up with an outline:

God's love = Giving or God's love means to give, to share, to enhance, etc. If you are loving, then you are giving. He gives himself to the world. The second part of the verse is that believing is possessing eternal life. Believing = Eternal life.

I. God so loved the World

He loves all the world. In the known world of 90 AD, this was comprised of all the countries on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea plus some countries in the Far East. He loves the people in Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific Ream, Eastern and Western Europe, South and North America. The World!! He loves the folks I do not like or love. To help us understand this word love, I want to mention three kinds of love found in the 1st Century. These four are mentioned in C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*:

EROS--Erotic love, with sensual desire and longing. In Greek, "intimate love."

A love expressed between males and females. It is normally a sexual love between human beings but not always.

STORGE LOVE--"affection" in ancient and modern Greek. A natural affection between parents and children. It is a kind of acceptance of irritating behavior.

PHILIA LOVE--friendship or affectionate love in modern Greek. It includes loyalty to friends, family, and community. In ancient Greece it used to describe love between family and friends. It would be enjoying an activity. From it we get the word "Philadelphia," the city of brotherly love. This would be the love around a family meal or at a large family reunion.

AGAPE LOVE--a love not tied to emotions but to some action. It is a caring, or reaching out to a person without expecting any return. I will love you, and I do not expect a response. It is the love described in I Cor. 13. In the New Testament it was used by Christians to describe the unconditional love of God.

To have a better understanding of AGAPE we need to make some comparison to human relations. God loves us more than our mother loves us.

In the spring of 9th grade in Laurel MS, after our school exams on a Friday, I got in a pickup truck with several other teenage boys. I do not recall anything that happened to me on this weekend. We drove out to the Bush Lake about 5 miles from town to go swimming in this 30-acre lake. As we were riding back to town with 5-6 boys in the back we went over some rolling hills, like those on US Hwy 229. As we were going up a hill the driver swerved quickly, causing the truck to hit an embankment and turn over on its side. All the others were thrown from the truck, but I held on and the truck fell on me. A couple in a Mississippi Power Truck came immediately. The man pulled a ladder off his truck as leverage to raise the pickup off of me. The employees of the Power Company administered artificial respiration, which helped me start breathing again. When I was taken to the hospital, my parents kept a three-day vigil praying I would wake up. My mother stayed close by, stating that I was dead for about 30 minutes. In family circles, many said your mother loved you more and watched over you in high school. She showed more affection to you than to your older siblings. A year later I broke my right leg practicing football. I recall my Mom feeding me, taking care of me while I was laid up for several days waiting for the swelling to recede. While in high school my mother was always asking me to do things for her and with her. It is great to have parent loving me so much. But, remember God loves us more than our mothers loved us. In reflecting on this pickup truck accident, as I recovered I realized many in St. John's Episcopal Church had been praying for me. This accident was an early experience where God became more than a word for me.

God loves the world unconditionally. Sometimes a person does not understand that he LOVES—AGAPES--the people in Africa, in the Middle East, the millions in China, and the Pacific Realm. He loves folks I prefer not to be around.

When we hear the words GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, what could this mean to us today? Certainly, it means the universe is friendly. You and I know some folks who live their lives thinking the Universe is evil, with many, many troubles. Friday Zoe and I were getting our lunch box from Publix. She arrived at the deli first, and then whispered, "That man is mean and angry; be careful in talking to him."

II. He loved the world that he gave.

Thus, this is very simple: To love means to give. If you think of yourself as a loving person, then you will also be a giving person. This loving God we worship gives all that we experience and possess. Zoe and I are in a Tuesday morning group. I recall one of the check-in questions asked us to share some serendipitous experiences within the past few weeks. During the sharing of unearned surprises, many mentioned some particular blessings from God, such as a trip to see a grown son, an improvement in an illness, a gift from a friend, etc. In hearing these simple stories (no one won the lottery) we could say God is so good, God is so loving. He is giving us so much.

There is a prayer in the Baptismal liturgy that mentions what we want God to give each of us. Open your program to page 3, second prayer in the right column.

- A. Bestow the forgiveness of sin. It is God's nature to forgive sin.
- B. An inquiring and discerning heart, a mind that discerns good from bad.
- C. He gives us the courage to will and to persevere. He knows we will need perseverance in times of adversity; he gives us the courage to keep on keeping on.

D. A spirit to know and love God. He places this Spirit into our minds and hearts to actually know and love God.

E. The gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Life with lots of joy, lots of wonder, the ability to enjoy life, embrace life, to experience the highs in life, endorphins, joy of pleasure. The last two Friday nights we drove 1000 yards to see our 7-year-old granddaughter play soccer. There are 5 games going on at once in this area. Parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, the younger brothers and sisters are playing their own games kicking soccer balls. What a great gift: Vestavia Hills Recreation Department maintains the fields, everyone is a volunteer, and 100's are enjoying the games and outdoors. The only ones paid are the maintenance crews for the baseball and soccer fields. He so loved the world that he gave.... What is your barometer of gratitude? What blessings, gifts, experiences, people God is giving us because he loves us!

III. Those who believe receive Eternal Life.

Faith is the Greek word *pistis*. It is not defined as objective assent to a particular truth. It is not understood as comprehending a doctrine or dogma. To believe is not "I believe that you are the person with authority to do such and such." It is not "I believe that this is true; this is what I believe." Its core meaning is TRUST, TO MAKE A COMMITMENT TO CHRIST AS WE UNDESTAND HIM. For those of us who are married, most of us can say I believe my spouse loves me, not I believe she/he is a great person. I can trust him or her to show care and love for me. As long as a person assumes faith, belief, *pistis* (Greek) is assent to a doctrine, then they tend to have difficulty understanding believing or trusting in Jesus as a very present risen Lord.

Note the way we find "trust" instead of the word "believe" in the Baptismal vows: Open your program to page 2, right column, sixth question down. "*Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?*" *Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?*" Let us notice the verbs in these vows. How can we apply this? Maybe become less of an "argumentative - philosophical - Christian debater" and become more of a Christian who seeks to trust God in Christ Jesus as a daily Lord and Companion. Or less on apologetics (which is important) to more on personal trust in God.

IV. "All who believe (trust) may have Eternal Life"

Now a word about the phrase "Eternal Life": as we read the synoptic gospels--MT, MK, LK--they tend to speak of Everlasting Life, a Resurrected Life in Heaven as something that is post-death, something that is after the grave. But John's gospel--which was the last one written, 80-90 AD--is written from a "realized eschatology." He is writing to the Greeks saying, "Jesus is alive in the church and the world." Having a committed relationship with Him means you are presently in ETERNAL LIFE. As you choose to be in the light, in a meaningful relationship with the Living Christ, then you are experiencing Eternal Life now. This is a QUALITY, NOT JUST A QUANTITY, OF LIFE. It is not just longevity of life; it is a quality of life that allows you to have longevity in life.

Again we see evidence of the quality of life in the phrase in the Baptismal Liturgy. Note page 3, left column, middle collect starting with "Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may LIVE IN THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION and look for him to come again in glory; who lives and reigns now and for ever. Amen." Moving on down

the left column is the same redundant phrase: "By it (Baptism) we share in his resurrection."
"...by the power of the Holy Spirit...may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior."

What is the application when we wake up Monday morning, or at our responsibilities at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon? Our trusting in Him to open the door to experience Eternal Life now. The Resurrected Lord is with us, in us, beside us, in front of us. We are connected to the Body of Christ where we are continually touched by Him.

Here is your assignment from being part of this Baptism of Alexander Philip today: Let John 3:16 be put to memory. Take the program home and underline the phrases on TRUST, BELIEVE IN (NOT ABOUT), LIVING IN THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION. Or look them up in the Book of Common Prayer, Baptismal Liturgy, page 302.