

Sermon for March 11, 2018
Series: Love Starts Here
“Love Starts Here: God’s Love”

John 3:14-21

One day I was visiting a church. It was one of those churches where the congregation carries on a dialogue with the preacher during the sermon. The preacher was obviously a learned man and was preaching on a difficult topic. As he progressed into the sermon people in the congregation started responding with, "Yes" "Uh-huh" and "Amen." As he got further in to the sermon the pace of the responses picked up as people began to catch on to what he was trying to say. Finally he got to a particularly difficult and important point in the sermon and everyone could see it in his mannerisms and face. Then above the "amens" and other responses an alto woman's voice gently rose and she said, "Make it plain, preacher. Make it plain." And you know what? He did!

That's what Jesus does here in this passage from John. He makes it plain. Nicodemus a very learned teacher of the law, a Pharisee, a respected religious leader, came to Jesus asking about the Kingdom of God. Jesus told him that he must be born again, but Nicodemus misunderstood. So Jesus explained it to him and made it plain.

John 3:14-21 is part of that explanation. And Jesus makes it so plain that John 3:16 is often quoted as a summary of the Christian faith. Jesus makes it plain, but so often we don't. In our sophisticated attempts to understand the gospel, we make it more complicated. In the process we completely lose sight of the original point.

Love starts here: with God’s Love. The first point we lose sight of is that "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son." It doesn't say that God kind of liked the world. It certainly doesn't say that God could care less for the world, but some might think that from the church’s lack of care for the world. It doesn't say that God felt sorry for the world, yet pity is the deepest emotion some "church people" feel for the world. It doesn't even say that God had a warm fuzzy feeling about the world, even though for some “warm fuzzy” is their definition of love. It says that God "so loved the world."

If fact God loved it so much that God what? What did the Almighty do because of love for the world? God gave the only begotten Son. No, God didn't just send Jesus into the world like you send a child to camp. God sent him to die. Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, came to suffer and die for the world. I have been struggling to come up with a definition of "so loved." And words seem to fail me. How do I express the depth and breadth of God's love?

But Jesus made it plain. He simply said, "My Father loves you this much" then he spread his arms on the cross and died. Yet we lose sight of this fact. We forget that God's love came first. Our whole religion, the church, who we are as God's people, even our salvation is the direct result of God's love.

"For God SO LOVED the world that he GAVE his only begotten Son!"

The second point is that "everyone who believes in him shall have eternal life." No, this is more than accepting certain doctrines about Jesus like: he is the Son of God, or that he rose from the dead. That is "believing about," this speaks of "believing in." It is a matter of trust. Maybe another way to phrase this is "everyone who trusts in Jesus shall have eternal life."

But that is too plain for most people. Like Nicodemus we wonder if there must be more. So

people do more than wonder, they make up more. They come up with tests of doctrine and faith. They ask if you are pro this or anti that and if you answer wrong they decide you are not a believer. They make a list of fundamental doctrines and no matter how much you place your faith in Jesus, if you don't ascribe to those fundamentals of the faith, they judge you as unsaved. Sometimes people think that if you don't go through the right rituals you don't have eternal life. They decided that you are unsaved because your church baptizes in the wrong way or serves communion in the wrong way. Or maybe that you must be lost because your church ordains women or doesn't ordain women.

But Jesus made it plain. "Everyone who believes in him shall have eternal life." It's simply a matter of trusting in Jesus. Now don't get me wrong doctrine and rituals and practices are all important. But they are an issue of serving God rightly not of receiving eternal life.

God's love comes first, but we respond in faith and trust.

The third point is that "God sent his Son not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him." We Christians really do a bad job of remembering this one. We are so busy condemning the world that we forget to try to save it. I think it was Charles Finny the famous evangelist who said, "You have to get them lost to get them found." It is true that sometimes people have to be convinced of their need for God before they will turn to God. But frankly sometimes the church is so busy getting people lost, we forget that our real goal is to get them found.

Why do so many in our society see Christians as judgmental? Of course we oppose sinful and hurtful life styles and we stand up against social and economic injustice, but if we were ministering to the world rightly, they would see us as well-meaning people who disagreed with them. Often they see the church as hateful because we are so busy condemning we forget to be about the business of redeeming. Yes, we need to stand for what is right and what is wrong, but not at the expense of failing to offer new life.

Jesus made it plain, "Those who dwell in darkness are condemned already" so he came to save them. If God sent the only begotten Son to save the world and not condemn it, then we should go forth for the same purpose. Because God first loved us, we should go into the world to liberate others - to offer hope and love and strength. Yet too often Christians go forth to condemn.

At this point some of you will be saying, "Make it plain preacher. Make it plain." Well Jesus already made it very plain! Love starts with God's love! God loved the world so much that God gave the only begotten Son to die on a cross. Out of love the Almighty did this so that everyone who believes in Jesus would not perish, but have eternal life. God didn't do this to have an excuse to get us lost, because we were lost already. Our Creator did it to have a way to bring people to new life.

Do you believe in God? Have you put your whole trust in Jesus and been born again? Jesus came for you because God loves you. He came that you might know God's love and glory eternally. Put your trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and let him set you free - that is after all why he came.

But perhaps you already believe in Jesus. Then follow Jesus' example of love. Go into the world, not to condemn, but to save. Live your life so that others might see God's love in you and be saved through Christ. If God so loved the world that Jesus sacrificed his life for it, shouldn't we love it enough to make sacrifices too?

Love starts here: God's love.