

John 3:1-17

³Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. 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.**

Sermon – Sunday, March 8, 2020 – St James

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. 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.

This is perhaps one of the best known verses in the Bible. Would you agree? We have seen it on roadside billboards, and bumper stickers. My first memory of it is on the Bishop Fulton Sheen tv show in black and white, way way back in the 1950’s. The programme was called ‘Life is Worth Living’. Do any of you remember that? Maybe I dreamed it but I think a man saying this verse dramatically introduced the show...For God so loved the world. We’ll come back to the amazing Bishop Fulton Sheen.

Unfortunately, this famous verse may be one of the most misinterpreted verses in the Bible. Today we will focus on this, - that God **so loved** the world that he made a dramatic gesture...he sent his one and only Son. Today we focus on this: that God did not send the Son to **condemn** the world, but **to save** the world.

This article appeared in a newspaper in the ‘Lost and Found’ column. It read:

Lost: dog, brown fur, some of it missing due to mange. Blind in one eye, partially deaf. Limp because of recent automobile accident. Slightly arthritic. Answers to the name of Lucky.

We laugh. It strikes us as funny. We can picture this old dingy brown, mangy, skinny dog, arthritic, crippled, limping around, half-deaf, half-blind! And answers to the name “**Lucky**”? But as you know, he was lucky. He was a lucky dog because someone wanted him back, someone was willing to pay to get him back, someone loved him. He was a lucky dog because he was loved. I am a lucky dog. So are you! Someone loves you, even when he, more than anyone else, realizes we don’t deserve it.

Did you know that every single one of you is a theologian? Really you say? Are you kidding? What is a theologian anyway? Well here’s one definition of theologian. A theologian is anyone who goes through life expecting to find God at work. Each one of you can make sense of the world, through the lens of God. Each of us can speak God’s activity we have seen in our lives. We can speak of God even with those who profess a God we might not recognize. We speak not for the sake of argument, not for the sake of winning a Biblical debate, but we speak for dialogue, learning, understanding. We speak for real conversations about faith.

We can think of ourselves as ‘doing theology’; theologians who look for what God is doing in our lives instead of merely asserting that God is.

Here is a little story. An altar boy came to the altar and in his nervousness, he dropped the wine. Tragedy! In an impulse of anger the priest slapped the altar boy and said, “That is a sacrilege! Don’t you ever come back again!” And the altar boy did not. His name was Tito, the Communist leader.

At about the same time another altar boy came to the altar and he, too, dropped the chalice and spilled the wine. The priest looked down at him and with a twinkle in his eye, whispered “You’re going to be a priest.” That altar boy’s name was Bishop Fulton J Sheen. And he did become a priest, one who used his voice to speak of God...becoming one of the first tv evangelists way back in the 1950’s. Here is a short clip.

<https://youtu.be/5HzmLNydErl>

I ask you to believe that you **can** speak and act. What does it mean in your lives that God loved the world? You might need to stop and think about it. But we can all find words about God’s love so that others might see God at work in our lives. Can you believe you are empowered to be theologians -- and that God needs you for the ‘God so loved the world’ verse to be the promise that it is?

Jesus said that the world will know we are Christians not by our uniformity of thinking or practice, but by our love for one another, which comes from God (see 1 John 4:7-21).

The good news is that the love we are commanded to share is not self-generated. **We don’t have to come up with this love all by ourselves.** Paul tells us in Romans 5:5 that,

“God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

The more we open our hearts to receive the gracious love of God, the more we are able to love one another.

We pray for all because Jesus died for all, because he loves all.

Pope Francis writes:

“Expand your own hearts in order to expand the heart of your parishes. Take your faith to the streets, meet everyone, welcome everyone, listen to everyone, embrace everyone. Every life is a life loved by the Lord, and every face shows us the face of Christ, especially the faces of the poor, the hurting, those who feel abandoned, those fleeing death who seek refuge in our homes and towns.”

Every act of compassion you make today matters. Every benevolent and kind gesture seeds a future of healing and goodness in our world.

Rather than retreat, we need the courage to notice God's loving activity around us. In all the darkness we may be walking through right now, it's good to remember that we are reflectors...reflectors of the light of Christ.

Just yesterday I received this email from Pope Francis

“Remain open to the world around you. Engage readily in dialogue with your neighbours, even those who may have other ideas than your own, yet long, like you, for peace, justice and fraternity. It is in dialogue that we can shape a shared future. Through dialogue, we build peace, caring for all and entering into dialogue with all... Go forth, reach out to every periphery! Go forth and be Church there, with the strength of the Holy Spirit!”

Pope Francis

We all make errors in our theology; you and me both.
So my recommendation is to err on the side of love.

Why?

Because... God is not doctrine. God is not denomination.
God is not war. God is not law. God is not hate. God is
not hell... God is Love.

Brian Zahnd
THEHAPPYGIVERS.COM

In other words, our preaching needs to be more about doing theology, rather than imparting theology. More about how to look for God's activity in our lives instead of asserting that God is. Yes, assertions of God's acts are foundational for how we anticipate God will act in our lives. But if assertions are left as truths alone, they do nothing but suggest that theology is simply random statements about God.

Lent is just such a time to push our theological imagination. To encourage theological thinking. Why? Because Lent is such a time when God makes the least sense of all.

Empower them with an invitation to witness to what it means in their lives that God loved the world.

theology

1 : the study of religious faith, practice, and experience especially : the study of God and of God's relation to the world