

The Cross

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

Recently, I saw a rebroadcast of an old "Sixty Minutes" program. It caught my attention because one of the spotlight reports featured the guy who seemed to be at every sporting event, wearing a rainbow-colored wig and carrying a large placard, on which was printed: "John 3:16." In the 1980's and into the 90's, if you watched virtually any sporting event, you undoubtedly caught sight of him, gyrating in front of the camera, flashing his biblical sign, with his outrageous wig flopping to and fro. He was called the "Rainbow Man."

Of course, most any one who has even a passing acquaintance with the Bible knows what John 3:16 says. As you just heard, it is the headline for our gospel reading today. But, truth to tell, whenever I saw "Rainbow Man" on TV., I experienced irritation, and I can't imagine that my response was unique. He offended me on two fronts.

First, his intrusion of himself into the television picture struck me as immature and self-centered. In a culture that seems to provide fifteen minutes of fame for each of its idiots, "Rainbow Man" evidently had no sense of time or sense of boundary. Wherever there was a camera, it was his self-appointed right to be the center of attention. But a more serious sense of offense surfaced for me in terms of what such behavior said about the Christian faith, in general, and in how our faith is conveyed, in particular. Specifically, as a form of Christian evangelism (which is precisely what "Rainbow Man" fervently believed he was doing), I was offended by the fact that, rather than spreading the gospel, he was (in my perception) making a cartoon out of this incredibly significant scripture.

The fact that God loves the world that he would give his own Son so that we may have life demands more respect and thought than I believed "Rainbow Man" was offering.

Sometimes, appearances can be deceiving, but evidently this is not the case with "Rainbow Man." As the "Sixty Minutes" report made clear, his entire life consisted of traveling from one sports venue to another, along with making the plans to find the camera angles so that he could be seen on the screen. I can't imagine what it cost him to travel from place to place and to buy all those tickets, not to mention the paucity of his social and emotional life, when so much of his energy and attention was taken up by his scheming to be on camera.

His notoriety reached its zenith, when television producers and directors began to fashion counter schemes to make sure that their cameras would not include the nagging "Rainbow Man." And it became a kind of game of televised hide-and-seek, with the television people being consistently outwitted by the wigged-out evangelist.

According to the "Sixty Minute's" report, "Rainbow Man" became a lost soul as soon as his venue was eliminated. People simply got bored with him, and if he is still alive today, he is one of those sad sacks who seemed to know that his fifteen minutes of fame must be sustained or else he would have no life.

But all this notwithstanding, John 3:16 still matters and demands our attention. Beyond the stereotyping cartoons and the easy sloganeering, this passage continues to stand as a touchstone of Christian faith. It is, in fact, a scriptural nutshell that has the capacity to bring us to what one contemporary theologian and teacher refers to as the "Heart of Christianity."¹¹

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This morning, I am going to preach about the cross of Jesus Christ as the main way into the heart of Christianity. And in order to make a good start, let me begin with this: "God so loved the world..."

I believe that you can always discern false faith, when people try to be more spiritual than God. As Robert Frost quietly points out in his poem: "Birches:" "...earth's the place for love." Right here, right now, this life is what is real; this life requires healing: our lives, our bodies; our souls, our memories, our ways of thinking and behaving. Consequently, "God so loved the world..."

This is to say that the focus of our faith is not somewhere way out there "in heaven," but rather our focus needs to be how "heaven" is being called forth by God from the depths of our own souls and hearts and minds and lives. We are to be made new in Christ Jesus our Lord, and while it may take an eternity for God's loving power to break through our hardened hearts and minds, God's perfect love is fully capable and most willing – to wait that long and to work that hard.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ...

God's love for us, for this world, in this world, far from being some sentimental, pastel notion, manifests itself in sweat and blood and in no small amount of tears. And the cross of Christ reflects the concrete truth of this.

Question: What does it cost you to love the one you love the most? Is this love a matter of one Valentine's Day after another? I think not. Rather, real love, real commitment, real connection is expensive – expensive because real love, real relationship demands that we risk being changed from what we are to what maturity and integrity and passion require. And because "God so loved the world," even the Creator of all that is must engage in these same realities of love. And the cost for God is complete.

Again, this brings us to the cross – not as a trendy piece of "bling-bling" but as a testimony to the love of God for the world.

Another question: If the cross stands at the heart of Christianity, how many of us are prepared to speak convincingly about the reality of the cross? What would you say?

In terms of entering into the heart of real Christianity, I am suggesting as strongly as I know how that the cross is first and foremost about God and God's inextinguishable love for the world – for you and for me. In a very real sense, it is a touchstone for us, orienting us to a profound and life-changing reality: namely, that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”

Recently, I have been introduced to a Canadian biblical scholar's reflections on the cross, and for me they have re-clarified a serious and helpful sense to its meaning. This comment is typical. Listen.

“...the creation is God's own handiwork...The cross of Jesus Christ is God's claim to this world – the claim, however, not of a despot, yearning for greater power and glory, but a lover yearning to love and be loved, and thus to liberate the beloved from false masters...”

Douglas John Hall continues: “Expressing the same thought in other language, the cross of Jesus Christ is the end-consequence of the divine determination to be ‘with us’ (*Emmanuel*)”^[2] And to translate the thought further, let me say that the cross makes clear what a real Christmas is about, how far God willingly goes to be “with us.”

For God -- so loved the world-- that he gave his only Son...

Another telling point about the cross as the entrance into the “heart of Christianity” needs saying, especially here in the Bible Belt. Again Douglas John Hall offers some crucial insight. He says:

*The theology of the cross...is...first of all a statement about God, and what it says about God is **not** that God thinks humankind so wretched that it deserves death and hell, but that God thinks humankind and the whole creation so good, so beautiful, so precious... that [it] is worthy dying for.*^[3]

Clearly, Good Friday is not our favorite occasion. The same point is manifest in the Baptism of a child, where we are tempted to “oogle” and “awe” at the cute infants in their white gowns, all the while ignoring the gravity of the promises we stand to make for them and with them. The fact is that, rather than employing a pseudo-theology of “washing sins away,” what we promise in baptism is this: to teach these innocents how to die in Christ. And in spite of what appears to many as such an unnecessarily negative and heavy tone to such a glorious occasion, the truth of the cross is that there can be no more precious gift than that of dying just once. For if we ever had the grace and wisdom to learn how to die in Christ -- to our fears, to our failures, to our foibles, what liberation and joy there would be in our hearts and lives, not to mention in the heart of our God.

But we persist in avoiding the gateway to such “eternal life,” perversely preferring in fear and denial to die over and over and over and over again: recycling not resurrecting the life of pain and suffering we know to the exclusion of the resurrected life that God knows and gives in his Christ.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...

On the surface of things, Christianity can be charged with being preoccupied with pain and suffering, focusing on the negative things in life; but this is only the case when we distort the loving reality of the cross. The point is this: "It is not because Christianity is predisposed to pain, but only because *there is* pain. The world is full of pain, and God loves the world."^[1]

Recently, one of my Benedictine Group colleagues offered an insight that helped me recognize two things about the cross. One is that there is the *need of the cross* (that is, something is wrong in life that needs redemption). But there is also the *fact of the cross* (that is, "God so loved the world..."). And what I am trying to convey to you in all of this is that *the fact of the cross* precedes and supersedes *the need for the cross*.

This is the "heart of Christianity." ***God so loved the world...***

Now, only two conclusions can be raised from this. Either God is an idiot for loving the world so much; or God is really onto something. Of course, most of the time you and I trust the latter conclusion: that God is onto to something that truly matters; and, therefore, this means that we are called to acknowledge God's passion for the world, for us, by responding to God with our own passion.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 2003

[2] Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Culture*, page 36-37.

[3] Hall, page 24.

[4] Hall, page 32.