

## What it Means to Believe—John 3: 14-21

(March 11, 2018-4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

The first time I opened the bible of my own free will occurred as a result of a sporting event. It was sometime during the 1980's. If you followed professional sports during this time you might remember a character by the name of Rainbow Man, who was so named because of the large and poofy rainbow coloured wig that adorned his head. Rainbow man would show up at major sporting events—the Super Bowl, Stanley Cup, World Series, Wimbledon, the Masters—and he would situate himself right where he knew the cameras would find him. As you watched the pitch come in, or the kicker make a field goal you couldn't miss him and his large sign. Beamed into millions of homes in big bold black letters it read "**John 3:16**". After seeing this a few times I opened a bible to John 3:16 and there it was: "*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.*" This was rainbow man's form of evangelism, and with limited time and space to get his message out he picked what for many Christians is the key piece of scripture—John 3:16.

It is one of the most misused, misunderstood texts in the entire Scripture, often used as a test to define the boundaries of Christianity, to say who is in and who is out. If you believe John 3:16 then you're in and you're saved, if you don't then you're out and you're damned. <sup>1</sup>This single verse has provided motivation for some of the most destructive and unchristian impulses of those who take the name Christian. Taken literally it suggests that those who do not believe in this Son will perish. It is difficult to overestimate the harm, hurt and abuse that has been encouraged by this literal rendering of John's Gospel. The bloody Christian Crusade against Muslims of the middle ages was based on the belief that Muslims were a threat to believing in the Son. The Holocaust toward Jews was nurtured by the notion that Jews were a threat to believing in the Son. Christian missionary work was often conducted among native peoples with John 3:16 as its driving force.

The irony is that of the four Gospel writers John was the least literal among them. All of the Gospel writers take great liberty with the actual events of Jesus' life and the things he said. They were not historians. They were seeking to communicate a faith. But, John is the one who exercises the greatest freedom in re-working and re-telling the story of Jesus. He does this in order to communicate his experience of something sacred and holy in and through the person of Jesus and the impact that experience had on the lives of the people in his community. John, the poet would be aghast at turning his Gospel into a wooden, sterile and literal interpretation of the things Jesus said and did. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning here and up to the end of the next paragraph is either adaptation or direct quotation of a sermon by Tim Johnson, *Journey Toward Faith: A Lenten Sermon on John 3:16*, <http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/journey-toward-faith-a-lenten-sermon-on-john-316/>, April 2006.

particularly ironic that John 3:16 follows the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, where Jesus specifically and unequivocally rejects the very literalism that has so often dominated the reading of this text. When Jesus offers the metaphor of birth to speak about spiritual growth, Nicodemus taking a literal approach to Jesus words says, "how can one be born a second time from your mother's womb?" John tells us Jesus was amazed at Nicodemus' literal understanding of this evocative image and says to Nicodemus, "You are a teacher of faith and yet you are unable to understand what I am saying?" Too often Christianity gets reduced to this, and the Christian church then becomes a group of people who all agree about the same religious information. So belief becomes about joining a club, a club that has a monopoly on truth. Its like the joke of the drunken man who got on a bus late one night, staggered up the aisle, and sat next to an eager young man who was clutching a bible. The young man looked the wayward drunk up and down and said, "I've got news for you, mister. You're going straight to hell!" The man jumped up out of his seat and shouted, "Oh man, I'm on the wrong bus again!" If we look deeper this joke illustrates the tragedy of Christian faith that is based merely on believing certain information. It totally and completely misses the point, forsaking loving relationships for correctness of belief.

Now, this view that sees Christian belief as agreeing to certain religious information also drives people away from the church. It drives people to misunderstand Christianity and reject it out of hand. People look at the claims that some Christians make and say "well, this doesn't make any sense to me, these claims are preposterous". So, they reject it all as nonsensical.

When we turn Christian belief into an agreement about religious information, we take the easy way out. It reminds me of that quote by the poet Chesterton, "It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." Neither Jesus nor John were interested in establishing a belief system as the basis for acceptance or rejection by God. They were however very interested in the question, how does one come to have faith? How does one grow and mature in one's experience of God? Unfortunately with passages like this we have to spend so much talking about what they are not that we only have a bit of time to speak of what they are. If our interest is in deepening our walk with God rather than creating belief systems of exclusion, than this passage from John, including John 3:16 has much to teach us.<sup>2</sup>

The late theologian and scholar Marcus Borg tells the story<sup>3</sup> about a sermon preached by a Hindu professor in a Christian seminary several decades ago. The text for the day included a passage about Jesus being the "only way", and about it the Hindu professor said, "This verse is absolutely true - Jesus is the only way." But, he went on to say, "And

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson

<sup>3</sup> This story was found in a sermon by Gary A. Wilburn, *Gateway into God's Realm*, <http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/gateway-into-gods-realm/>, April 22, 2006

that way - of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being - is known in all of the religions of the world." The way of Jesus is a universal way, known to millions who have never heard of Jesus." The way of Jesus is not about a set of beliefs; it is about a way of life. "Believing in Jesus" does not mean believing certain doctrines about Jesus, "as though one entered new life by believing certain things to be true, or as if the only people who can be saved are those who know the word 'Jesus.' Thinking that way virtually amounts to salvation by syllables. Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of death and resurrection - the path of transition and transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being based on self-giving love.<sup>4</sup>

Christian belief is life lived in trust—not only to trust what you do not see, but also to see what you trust—to see the reality of God not as a historical fact, but rather as a living, active presence directing your life. In John's words, it is to see the light that has come into the world, and not to hide from it as the source of our judgment but to run toward it as the source of our salvation from a life of meaninglessness and fear into a life of purpose, meaning, wholeness and hope. John puts it this way "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son... (not) to condemn it, but in order that the world might be saved through him." It is the promise for those of us who are committed to the Christ path to the Divine. Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

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<sup>4</sup> Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. 216-217.