

September 29, 2019

For God So Loved the World - So What?

John 3:1-17

We'll begin this morning with a well know Scripture verse: *"For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). We know that verse. Many of us can recite that verse from memory. So what? Why does it matter?

Part of why it matters is what Jesus means by "God"

Who is this God we are talking about? The Good News is God is not some vague Force or figment of our imagination. He is real. He is personal. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, all-holy, all-pure, and all-perfect. The fundamental descriptor of this personal God in Scripture is love. *"God is love"* (1 John 4:8).

The Good News is God is love. Because of His love, God chooses to create the universe and everything in it. God didn't need to create anything. There is no reason God needs galaxies, stars, mountains, trees – even people. He delights to create – and to create extravagantly, wondrously, profoundly – simply because of His love.

The Good News is God is love. Because of His love, when things go sideways (thanks to the disobedience, stubbornness, selfishness, pride – the sin) of human beings, God chooses to work towards the salvation, redemption, and restoration of His creation back into harmony. God is the God who welcomes His prodigal children home.

Part of why it matters is what Jesus means by "love"

"Love" in the Bible is not a sentimental feeling or an abstract philosophical construct. In the Bible, love is a covenant, a deep, profound commitment to **DO** and **BE** what is best for the other in a relationship. Think of a married couple who covenant together, committing themselves to love one another for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health from this day forward and forever. In an even more profound way, God covenants to love His creation for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health from this day forward and forever.

God, in His love, calls one family – Abraham and his clan – to be a blessing, to be Good News. They stumble and fail. God, in His love, calls one nation – the Israelites – to be a blessing, to be Good News – they stumble and fail. Finally, God, in His love, sends His Son, Jesus – to be Good News, to take upon Himself all the sin and evil of the world. And Jesus, as He dies on the cross, is God's ultimate expression of love. This is not sentimentalism. This not philosophy. This is dramatic action, nailed to the cross of human history.

John 3:16 is followed by 3:17: *"God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."* This is love.

Part of why it matters is what Jesus means by "the world"

There is a large daisy on the east wall of our sanctuary. On each petal is the phrase "He loves me" in ten different languages from our congregation: Karin (Burma), French, Romanian, German, Spanish, Yoruba (Nigeria), English, Dutch, Chinese, and Italian. God loves each us and knows us in our own language. That is Good News. Great news.

Nina and Larry Weaver (who created the daisy) say the inspiration came from the old children's rhyme, "He loves me? He loves me not?" They want to make the point that the good news of the gospel is that God absolutely DOES love each and every one of us more than we can imagine.

"The world" is bigger than the Caucasian world. Or the born-in-Canada world. Or even the "Christian" world. It includes people of every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:9 – see last week's sermon). That is Good News.

"The world" is even bigger than simply people. It includes all of God's creation – Psalm 148 (September 8) talks about all creation praising God – sun, moon, stars, sea creatures, mountains, hills, trees, wild animals, cattle birds ... The Greek word is "kosmos" – God loves everything and everyone He has created. He desires that it all come back into right relationship with Himself.

Part of why it matters is what Jesus means by "eternal life"

"Eternal life" in the Bible does include the assurance that one day, someday, we will be with God, Jesus, and the Spirit forever. The power of the grave has been destroyed. *"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"* (1 Corinthians 15:54-55).

But in John 3, Jesus promises us "eternal life" here and now. It is a reality that changes life – right here, right now – when we put our faith and trust in Jesus.

God's promise is that, as we put our trust in Him, His personal Presence, His Spirit, comes into our lives. *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age,"* Jesus promises us (Matthew 28:20). *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever, the Spirit of truth ... the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you"* (John 14:16-26). An essential part of our Good News is God's abiding presence is with us.

- His Spirit forms us – shaping us to be more and more like Jesus.
- His Spirit informs us – teaching us His truth.
- His Spirit transforms us – to be His Good News in the world.

The Good News of God's abiding presence is a new perspective on who I am. I am a beloved child of God. That is my primary identity. I am not a cosmic accident. I am not just a SIN number. I am God's beloved creation, His child. That changes my self-perception: I know my fundamental identity is found in relationship with God – today, not just forever.

The Good News of God's abiding presence is a new perspective on life. We live with a different perspective knowing that this life is not the be all and end all of existence. The Spirit helps us see how the challenges of this life build our character to be more and more like Jesus.

The Good News of God's abiding presence is a new perspective on purpose. We yearn for our lives to have significance and meaning. What we do matters. The Spirit inspires us to make a difference in the world. *"So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless"* (1 Corinthians 15:59).

Surprise the World!

God – this loving personal God – commits and covenants to love all of His creation, including us. He yearns for us to have eternal life and experience His abiding presence, now and forever. That's Great News.

Through the abiding presence of His Spirit, He is working in us, through us, and in His creation as well. That's Good News.

This has implications for us. *"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us"* (1 John 4:11-12).

How are we doing at loving one another? Getting really practical about this, Michael Frost challenges us to adopt "missional habits" – new ways of living and acting, in accordance with God's Spirit – that help us share our faith in natural, nonthreatening ways. When we live this way, we surprise the world.

"The first habit I want you to consider embracing is that of blessing others. In fact, I'd like you to bless three people each week – at least one of whom is a member of your church and at least one of whom is not. The third can be from either category" (*Surprise the World*, p.29).

He suggests three primary ways we can do this:

1. Words of affirmation – send a note, write an email, text – send words of affirmation and encouragement. Mark Twain once said, *"I can live for two months on one good complement."*

2. Acts of kindness – help a neighbour, babysit someone’s kids (for free), pay for coffee. Look for opportunities to do little things that make a big difference in someone’s life.
3. Gifts – gifts come in all shapes and sizes: cheering up a struggling person; a food gift certificate for a family.
4. I would add a fourth – spend quality time together

"This means blessings (will) ricochet around your church, as members are affirming, gifting, and performing acts of kindness for each other. It also means church members are propelled outward to bless unbelievers in these ways. Just watch how unleashing a culture of blessing – words of affirmation, acts of kindness, gift giving – binds people to each other. It has the effect of strengthening the Christian community while launching its members more deeply into the lives of outsiders" (Frost, p. 34).

Try it. Try blessing three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church. It’s not that complicated. It is radical in a self-absorbed, self-oriented, self-gratifying world. It is one way we can live “questionable lives” – lives that invite people to ask us why we do what we do.

Why do we bless others? Because God has blessed us. And we want to pass on the good news of God’s grace and love.

Michael Frost writes, *"We are called to bless because we were made to bless the nations. No doubt those 4th Century Christians that Emperor Julian was complaining about were feeding the poor, ministering to the dying, and practicing benevolence toward plenty of strangers who didn’t convert. It wasn’t an evangelistic strategy as such. It was simply their guileless lifestyle. And it was habitual. This was the source of Julian’s outrage: the Christians were doing these things with no sense of personal gain in mind."*

"We need to develop a rhythm of gift giving, time spending, and affirmation sharing as an end in itself because it fosters a spirit of generosity, it mirrors the character of God, and it alerts others to His reign" (pp. 35-36).

We’ll end with another well-known passage of Scripture: *"Jesus told his disciples, 'I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age'"* (Matthew 28:18-20).

The Good News is God’s abiding presence with us. Out of that strength, try to bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.