

Like It Or Not
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

I am aware that the reading from the Gospel According to John contains perhaps THE most popular verse in all the Holy Scriptures. However, I have a confession to make: I don't much care for today's gospel reading for that very reason. I've shared with many of you my aversion to using John 3:16 without including verse 17, as well. However, I've also identified some other negative feelings regarding this verse.

Maybe I should explain by first asking you a question: What would it be like if someone died for you? I suspect it's not all that hard for most of us to imagine the incredible sense of gratitude we might feel for that person. But now imagine that it wasn't just an impulsive act of bravery, someone pushing you out of the way of a car or something like that. Rather, someone knew you were in mortal danger and deliberately exchanged his or her life for yours. Suddenly, it's not just gratitude we may feel, but a profound sense of debt. How can you possibly make it up to someone who has given you so much? Well, this is essentially the picture Jesus offers of God.

For the "giving of the Son" he references isn't simply sending Jesus to deliver a message, it's giving Jesus over to die, to die on a cross, to die on a cross for us. This is why, as Martin Luther once said, this verse is "the gospel in a nutshell."

This is also why, however, that there is something troubling, even scandalous at the heart of this beloved verse. Notice that God doesn't ask our opinion about all this first. God doesn't ask our permission. God doesn't even consult us. God, in fact, brooks no objection but just goes ahead and gives the Son over to die...for us.

Do you see what I mean? Part of me is incredibly grateful and part of me pretty indignant. I mean, how dare God! How dare God sacrifice so much for us and by doing so have such a claim on us! It's not just scandalous but, if you think about it, even offensive, as it leaves absolutely no room for our hopes and plans, our wants or desires. It leaves us completely out of control.

A minister colleague shared a story recently of an experience he had with his six year-old son, Benjamin, as he protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, "Daddy, I hate you!" Tom, possessing the presence of mind I wish I more frequently had replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you."

And then what do you think Benjamin said? "Oh, it's okay." Or maybe, "Sorry, Dad. I love you, too." Nope. When Tom told his son that he loved him, Benjamin yelled back, "Don't say that!" Surprised, Tom continued, "But, Ben, but it's true – I love you." "Don't say that, Daddy." "But I love you, Ben." "Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!" And then it came, Tom reported, almost completely unbidden: "Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!"

Even at six years old, you see, Benjamin realized that in the face of unconditional love he was powerless. If Tom had been willing to negotiate – "I'll love you *if* you go to bed nicely" –then Benjamin would have been a player: "Okay, this time, but I'm not eating my vegetables at dinner tomorrow." But once Tom refused to negotiate, refused to make his love for his son conditional on something Benjamin did, then Ben could do nothing but accept or flee that love.

The same is true with us. If God makes God's great love for the world and us conditional, then we, suddenly, have tremendous power. We can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God's love. We can even tell God to go take a hike if we don't care for God's terms. But when God just loves us – completely and unconditionally – and when God just goes and dies for us, well then the jig is up; there's just nothing we can do to influence God. And that's just what happens in this verse. Listen to it once more: *"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. 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."*

And there it is, in a nutshell: God in Jesus has made God's decision...and it is *for* us. Yes, we can run. But we can't change the fact that God loves us, that God in fact loves the whole world more than we can imagine. And so no wonder this is the world's most popular Bible verse, because it is, indeed, good news, even the best news. But first it's hard. Hard because we're not in control. Hard because it's not up to us. Hard because every time we hear how much God loves us we also know that we had nothing to do with it, cannot influence it, and therefore are out of control. And, sometimes, that can make us afraid.

Perhaps trained by bitter experience to believe that no one can be trusted, or that life itself is such a gamble and so chaotic that we'd better stay in control no matter what, God's unconditional, uncontrollable love can frighten us. John says as much in today's reading: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed."

Desiring to maintain some semblance of control at any cost, we sometimes run from the light, fleeing God's loving embrace, only to find ourselves trapped in the darkness of our own devices.

But then along comes life, or God, or destiny, or tragedy, or whatever you want to call it, something that shakes us up, presents something utterly beyond our ability to cope, and drives us to our knees in despair – you know, like the end of an important relationship, or the death of a loved one, or the return of illness, or the loss of a job – and you realize in a flash of painful insight that you never were in control. Not of your life, not of circumstances or fate, and certainly not of God. And all of a sudden this difficult, disturbing, even offensive message about God's grace becomes the best news you can imagine. Because here's the thing: precisely because we are *not* in control of God and therefore not in control of our relationship with God, we realize that it is the one relationship we can't blow, the one

relationship that we can't screw up. God has taken responsibility for this one. And God has promised to bring it to a good end.

This is why I find John 3:16 so difficult, so offensive...and at the same time so desperately hopeful and life-giving. Indeed, this is why it is both my least and my most favorite verse in the Bible: because it promises that God will never let us go, that God will not take "no" for an answer, that God will pursue us like the intrepid hound of heaven until we are God's own.

Does that mean that we have nothing to do, nothing to contribute to this most important relationship? Definitely not! Once we have been loved this fully, this completely, we WANT to respond in love, honoring God and sharing the news of God's love for the world with all we meet. Further, we can love each other, throwing ourselves into struggles and celebrations all around us, always working for the good of our neighbor and the world, propelled forward by the knowledge that God loves us and this world so very much. So, there's plenty to do. But we do it all knowing that we are messengers, witnesses to what God has done for us, not managers.

So hear both the judgment and promise of this passage once again. You are not in control – of this world or even your life, not really. But the God, who created the vast cosmos, will hold onto you amid the chaos, love you even when you feel most unlovable, and bring you to eternal life. As St. John writes and as Jesus' cross and resurrection guarantees, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Like it or not. Amen.

Will you please pray with me.

God of all loving compassion, love us, keep us, hold onto us in all things, even, and especially, when we are tempted to flee your love and light, and then release us again that we might in turn love one another. Amen.