

John 3:16-21

Light of Love

If you grew up in the church and particularly went to Sunday school, the foremost verse you would have learned was John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

This verse seems to keep things in a fairly simple perspective. And it is a good place to start when learning about God's deep love for people by sending Jesus to us, God in human form. But context, as always, is important. The story that comes before this statement is about a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. The conversation leaves a knowledgeable and learned Nicodemus confused and perplexed.

The verses that follow this statement are equally difficult. It hopefully continues with the words, "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." (v17) Then it gets challenging, speaking of condemnation, judgement, evil deeds, and hate. These words are powerful. They make us want to turn away and skim over them. These words are spoken about each of us.

There is a dialogue of opposites...light and darkness. We often speak in these ways, light and dark, day and night, male and female, heaven and earth, true and false. And this is the contrast that the passage is making. Jesus is the light that has come into the world illuminating the darkness. But what kind of light is Jesus? What darkness does Jesus' light reveal?

The darkness that is written about is deeds of evil. We heard, "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." (v19-20) If you are like me you don't want to think of yourself as evil or doing evil deeds. We think of evil as sinister and dark. Our viewing of programs and videos on television or streaming services and social platforms shape our view of evil. We think of murder, sexual and physical assault, as well as a host of other actions as evil. Yet, with our exposure to all this on a near daily basis we are becoming desensitized to the horrors of it all.

For most of us, this is what evil looks like. But what of the lesser evils. None of us would like to think about gossip, adultery, or stealing as evil. They are just bad things that people do. If one looks more broadly, are we complicit in the oppression and exploitation of others by our attitudes, purchases, or complacency? Does injustice move us to working toward the transformation of the world, or are we content to read about it or view it and not be moved by the suffering of others?

What does it mean to *believe* in Jesus? Is it just agreeing that he was a good guy and a great example? Or is it something more? Is it about changing the world and shining the light that is Jesus into it?

Professor Samuel Cruz writes,

To change the world or save it requires a process that ends hate, injustice, oppression and replaces it with justice, compassion, mercy, love, equality, etc. However, verses 19-21 tell us that some choose hate over light, evil deeds over good deeds, and therefore they reject the light of the son of God. Others, however agree with Jesus' quest to change or restore the world to its original intent from a world full of evil and injustice to a loving, just and caring world. Therefore, for John, believing in Jesus has more to do with what people believe regarding evil, hate, exploitation, and injustice rather an esoteric "religious" conversion.¹

In other words, it is not enough, in the Gospel of John, to just love Jesus. That love, that belief in Jesus is belief in his teachings that are meant to transform us and transform the world.

Of course, we know that nothing is as black and white as the light and darkness spoken about in the scripture. There are always shades of light and dark, shadows where the light is dim or darkness where the light cannot seem to reach. Those who struggle with mental illness, addictions, or suicidal thoughts know how darkness can snuff out the light. Those who are blind or whose sight is, as we say, "growing dim" know that light and dark are realities they struggle with and it has nothing to do with evil.

Skin colours range from deep black to pasty white, this too has nothing to do with good or evil.

Yes, "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." And, "God did not send the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Yet...what we believe about Jesus means something, we are imperfect people striving to be more like Jesus, and if that is the case, we continually need to be aware of injustice, of where mercy is lacking, where hate abides and be working toward changing things where people are cared for compassionately, where hate has no place, and justice is the rule especially for those on the margins of society, those who feel helpless, lost, and forgotten.

¹ Cruz, Samuel. [Commentary on John 3:14-21 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)
Accessed December 16, 2022.

It means trusting that Jesus is the light of the world. That God loves the world and is working through us in the power of the Holy Spirit as we grow in understanding and faith.

I recently read the words of a faithful Christian physician, who was a friend and lived here in Thunder Bay, he wrote, "Christian principles must guide everything we do or say or think. There is no half way – you either are or you are not. We must go the whole way and have the golden rule as our guide 100 percent of the time. This is not to say that I consider myself or anyone else perfect. I have never met a perfect man or woman and I don't anticipate that I ever will but perfection should be our aim."

Perfection of love, justice, mercy, compassion, and grace. These are not fully attainable in our lifetime, but we strive for them as Jesus taught us. He is the light that illumines our way and our living. Yes, to love Jesus and believe in him can be as simple as just knowing that Christ was born a babe, lived, died, rose again and ascended to the right hand of God. But to live in order that the world might be saved through Jesus means that we have a part in the ongoing transformation of the world.

God chooses to use each of us, as imperfect as we are, to change the world, to show others God's love, and to point others to Christ whose teaching were about healing, feeding, forgiving and freeing people.

It is personal relationship but one that reaches out into community and is lived in community, the community of the church locally and worldwide. Our relationship with Jesus, our believing in Jesus, exposes the evils in our lives, in systems, and in structures. We look for the truth that Jesus taught so that each day, and in the end, it can be said that, "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (v21) And that is something to hold onto. Our belief is in Jesus, our motivation is that our deeds are done in God.

In this time of Advent, as we prepare once again to hear the story of the Christ Child born to be God with us, we know that we live our lives in the hope of Christ, the peace of Christ, the joy of Christ, and in the light of Christ, which is love, the love of God for us. A love so expansive that it moved God to send love as a light in a world of darkness.

May the light of God's love, shine in and through us today and everyday, so that others may come to know the love that is there for them in Christ. May the star of Bethlehem lead us to the light of love. Amen.