

February 23, 2025

The Gospel of John
God So Loved the World
John 3:16-21

Rev. John DuBose
 Easley Presbyterian Church
 Easley, South Carolina

What is the Gospel? Seems like a pretty straightforward question, but what exactly do we mean when we say that word, *Gospel*? I know it means *good news*, but what is the good news? One of my very best friends is a Baptist, and I don't hold it against him. But he always used to say to me, "No matter what, you gotta keep the main thing the main thing. Nothing else matters." And that's really good advice as long as you know what the main thing is. But how do we know? Because it seems like everyone has their own opinion of what the main thing is... what the Gospel is. I mean, what are we really talking about? What is the Gospel?

Episcopal Priest, Jacob Smith, tells the story of attending a funeral that his mentor, a preacher named Dr. John Montgomery, was officiating. And he gave a remarkably beautiful sermon at the funeral that moved Jacob to tears. And afterward, Jacob went up to Dr. Montgomery and thanked him. He said, "Dr. Montgomery, that was one of the finest sermons I've ever heard. Thank you for preaching the Gospel..." and Dr. Montgomery peered over the pulpit and looked down at Jacob and said to him, "And what my dear boy would you say is the Gospel from the scriptures?" And Jacob froze... immediately his mind went blank... but eventually he seized on that old familiar promise... that "Jesus died for our sins." And a smile came over Dr. Montgomery's face and he said, "O thank God, I thought you were going to say something about building the kingdom."¹

But when I first heard that story, I had to stop for a second and think to myself, well, if you had asked me what the Gospel is, I probably would've said something about building the kingdom. In fact, I did. When I applied for this job, I had to write a statement of faith. In the very last sentence of that faith statement, I said, "The church... has been tasked with proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed... striving to participate in God's mission of love and service to all creation."² Pretty impressive, right? No wonder I got the job. But, I mean, isn't that what Christians are called to do? Aren't we supposed to be good people? Aren't we called by God to participate in the building up of the kingdom? Certainly, no Christian would disagree with that.

Of course, that's true. God calls each and every one of us to live in Kingdom ways. To love and care for our neighbors. But that calling alone is not the message of the Gospel. In fact, the Gospel has very little to do with our actions towards God. Because the truth of the matter is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is entirely and exclusively about what God does for us. Our good work only ever comes in response to the hearing of the Gospel. In my statement of faith, I had

¹ [Same Old Song: Epiphany 5 \(C\): Click Click](#)

² John DuBose Statement of Faith

my categories mixed up. What I thought was first should have only ever been second. What's first is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

That's the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is love. He gave his only Son so that we might have life. It's entirely gift. It's got nothing to do with what we give. It has everything to do with what God gives. God gives his love.

That's easy enough, right? So easy, in fact, that you could probably fit it on a billboard or a bumper sticker. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Yeah, that should work. Maybe that's what we should do. We should put it everywhere. Surely the world would be transformed if they only heard this good news.

I'm joking, of course. Because we hear this all the time, don't we? We hear it so often that we've started to forget what it actually means. Or maybe we never really knew what it meant to begin with. I asked the question before about what we mean when we talk about the Gospel. But I think even if we all agreed that the Gospel is summed up in this verse, we still wouldn't know what it means. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." That's very nice of God. But what does it mean? I've always thought of it like a parent speaking to her child, saying, "I love you so much!" Well, how much is so much? Something I say to my kids all the time: "I love you to the moon and back!" "I love you to the moon and back and around the earth and up to heaven 100 times."

"Wow! That's a lot, dad. Thanks!" If God wanted to show his love that way, he could certainly do it. He can and often does fill us with a sense of his love. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, talks about how, while reading scripture, he felt his heart "strangely warmed" by the love of God.³ I'm sure God does love us with that kind of sentimentality. I've felt it myself in quiet moments. Moments when all seems right with the world. But that's not what these verses mean. And if we're honest, most of the time, that's not the kind of love we need from God. It's nice, but it's not enough. Because, you see, we've got a problem. The problem is what the Bible calls *Sin*. And it's a big problem. It's the kind of problem that causes families to split apart. It's the kind of problem that causes neighbors to hate one another. It's the kind of problem that causes nations to go to war. It's a big problem! A problem that we can't solve on our own.

What's clear is that we need help... Actually, we need more than help. We need salvation. God so loved the world.

So, how can we hear these verses anew? Maybe we need to hear it with different words. One preacher says we should try this instead: Instead of translating Jesus's words as, "God so loved the world," perhaps a better translation would be, "God loved the world in this way... that he gave his only son." Why is that a better translation? My preaching professor told me I should never do this from the pulpit, because it's terribly annoying and distracting, but I'm going to do it anyway: the Greek adverb *houtos*, which the ESV translates as *so*, stresses the manner of God's love rather than its quantity.⁴

³ [How the phrase "Strangely Warmed" originated - Wesley Tidings](#)

⁴ Connections – Year B, Volume 2 – The Fourth Sunday of Lent – John 3:14-21 Commentary 1

Because the love of God is more the sentimental love of roses and chocolates. It is more than the love of hearts strangely warmed. The love of God is the active, self-giving love that defies all attempts to quantify it. If you tried to measure out God's love and assign a number to its value, you couldn't do it. Even if your scale was infinitely large, it would still break, or if your tape measure was infinitely long, it would still run out. We're not talking about the quantity of God's love. We're talking about its quality. How does God love? What does God's love look like?

Well, maybe it looks like this... Our Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread, and having given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is broken for you."⁵ His body, broken for you. Broken for me. That's what God's love looks like. It's a self-giving love. It's a love that dies in order that we might live. The apostle Paul ponders this mystery the love of God in his letter to the Romans. Romans 5:6-11 says,

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹

Or to put it another way, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son." It's this kind of love that makes the cross an appropriate symbol for the love of God. Just like John 3:16, the symbol of the cross has become so familiar to us that it loses its potency in a lot of ways. But we should not forget the brutality of it. It's a gallows. It's a guillotine. It's an instrument of execution. But it's also the true measure of God's love for us. A love so great that, Paul says, "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."⁶ The cross, a symbol of death, has been transformed instead into a symbol of life. Frederick Buechner says that the cross is "the crossroads of eternity and time... it is the place where such a mighty heart was broken that the healing power of God himself could flow through it into a sick and broken world."⁷

That is the truth of God's amazing love! That's the Gospel! God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

Samuel Wells, a priest in the Church of England, tells the story of a man in his congregation whose life was not going the way he wanted. He was angry, and he was sad. Wells was leading a group discussion about the love of God. And the man interjected, almost shouting, and said,

"Don't talk to me about love... How's that supposed to relate to me? My partner left years ago. My family lives miles away. And my last dog just died... I loved that dog... Where's my love to go now?"

Wells says, "Some questions genuinely seek an answer; others are meant to end a conversation. I wasn't sure which kind this one was... so I took a risk, and said, gently, "Imagine eternity from God's point of view. Imagine God having all the love pent up like you have right now. But the difference is, God's got that love all pent up potentially

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:23-24

⁶ Philippians 2:8

⁷ Frederick Buechner

forever. God's like you. God's thinking, 'Where's my love to go?' So God creates the universe. But God's got still more love to give. So God creates life, and makes humanity, and calls a special people. But that's still not enough. God's got yet more love to give. So God comes among us as a [human being]... [that's] why the universe was created. It was created for us to be the place where God's love could go.'"⁸

Friends, God created us for love. God saves for love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

⁸ [Where is my love to go? | The Christian Century](#)