**SERMON John 3:11-17**

**Opening**

There are few verses in scripture that are more iconic, more recognizable, more visible outside the walls of the church, than John 3:16. It’s been memorized by countless Sunday school students, displayed on signs at major sporting events, and printed on the bottom of shopping bags and soda cups. This bible verse is regarded by many as the most concise expression of the Christian faith, and you probably can recite it in the King James translation: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’’

Now, some of you may know, but I discovered for the first time this week that, this verse first leapt into popular culture in the US in the ‘70s, when born-again Christians started holding “John 3:16” signs at stadiums as a way to spread the Gospel, at least according to a professor of evangelism at Boston University. The most famous figure of that era, despite currently serving three consecutive life sentences on kidnapping charges in a Californian penitentiary, was apparently an eccentric man named Rollen Stewart. He wore a rainbow-colored wig and danced with a “John 3:16” sign behind the goal posts at football games, or behind the home plate at baseball games, and the backboard at basketball games. He was nicknamed “Rock ’n’ Rollen” and “Rainbow Man,” and even though he has seen ran afoul of the law, he is still credited with popularizing John 3:16 in the wider American culture.

**Link**

But public appearances of John 3:16 still continue without “Rock ‘n’ Rollen.’ You’re likely to see it written on cleats, armbands and even foreheads. This verse remains important, particularly for folks who would describe themselves as evangelical Christians. Which led me to think, what *new* can possibility be said about this passage? How can St Andrew *United Church of Christ*, a mainline community of faith, leading on the progressive side, how might we read and engage with this iconic verse in a way that inspires and energizes this Lenten season.

**Inclusion and Abundant**

Well, the first thing that strikes me about John 3:16 that it has often been used to assert exclusion rather than inclusion. However, something quite extraordinary happens when you put it back into its context, because alongside verse 17 we are greeted with a declaration of the sheer breadth of God’s love and God’s acceptance, “God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” Isn’t that remarkable!!

And we of course see the outworking of God’s love in the person of Jesus. God loves the world, not just in theory. But in real flesh and blood. God’s love, though global, it also made specific…it is particular. As particular as the incarnation itself. Through Jesus, we see that God loves a Samaritan woman. God loves a man paralyzed his entire life. God loves sinners and outcasts. God loves and grieves for a friend dead in the tomb for four days. God loves Peter who will deny his discipleship. Judas who would betray him to death. You see, the actions of the human being DO NOT determine the actions of God. God is not like human beings. For God is just and God is gracious. God doesn’t have the same prejudices as us, the same biases, the same likes, and dislikes. “For God so loved the world,” says John, that God sent Jesus “not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:17).

Lent is a fantastic time to push our theological imaginations, again. To flex the muscles of our inclusive theology, to challenge ourselves again to pay attention to the sheer expansiveness of God’s invitation to fallen human beings. For, it is possible in Lent, during this season when lament, confession and reflection can leave us feeling low, burdened by the pain, and hurt in the world, and in ourselves, to feel hopeless, alone, and even angry. But, let this second Sunday of Lent be a “mini-Easter” for you, and remember again, imagine again that God’s love extends to you! Even as we cry out of forgiveness.

**Link**

And it is not just human beings in need of healing and wholeness, the scripture tells us that the earth groans for healing and wholeness too. The land, the sea and air, the animals and their habitats, ecosystems, and biospheres both visible and invisible to the human eye). And these verses, John 3:16 and 17 assure us that God’s posture towards the hurt of the WHOLE world, is indeed love.

**Nature**

“For God so loved the world,” says John, that God sent Jesus “not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:17).

* For the world to be saved is for the world to be

…healed of its many wounds and made whole.

* For the world to be saved is for the world to be

…liberated from all its injustices, inequities, and oppressions.

* For the world to be saved is for the world to be

…reconciled to God and one another from all its alienations, divisions, and polarizations.

* For the world to be saved is for the world to be

…regenerated and renewed, so that life emerges out of death.

This is journey to which we are called. To be about the world’s flourishing and not it’s suffering.

I find myself grateful this year to be aided in our meditations on Wendell Berry’s Sabbath Poems. Through which we are guided to look at the world in beautifully broad ways, to see ourselves as part of the whole earth community. To recognize that when we read, “For God so loved the world,” we understand not just the personal implications of that– that the Divine Source of all things has interacted with imperfect, complicated and contradictory human beings and *yet still* adopts a posture of LOVE towards us. But that this statement, does not simply have implications for humankind, but also the whole world. Our Kentuckian farmer/poet knows this. The love of the Creator has cosmic, environmental implications too.

Is it possible for those of us who continue to identify with the Christian faith and our facing a decade of as-yet-unseen environmental and climate catastrophes, is it possible that we might find some new catalyst in John 3:16, to continue, to complete God’s love of the world by engaging in efforts towards conservation, climate justice, and environmentalism? I grateful for Wendell Berry this Lent, for reminding me of the sheer breadth of the God’s love of the natural world, and how nature can impart Divine wisdom to us.

**Link**

I’m also grateful for Sundays in this season. In our tradition, Lenten Sundays have always been considered ‘little Easters,’ the day on which we celebrate resurrection and new life. Sundays are for rejoicing and for rest, moments when we don’t just lament the failings and inadequacies of the world and our efforts in it, but that we get to come together and encounter the Divine in community, celebrating and worshiping a God who still LOVES us, still partners with us, still enlivens us, still comforts, and strengthens us.

Berry closes the poem we read today, with this realization:

Here is what will always be. Even in me,

the Maker of all this returns in rest,

even to the slightest of His works,

a yellow leaf slowly falling, and is pleased.

Just as I delight in the falling leaves of autumn, the Maker delights in me, even “the slightest of His works.” [PAUSE] “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.”

**Sabbath**

So, what does the holy practice of Sabbath-keeping have to do with all of this, or Lent for that matter? Well, again our poet offers some insight, the profound LOVE and affection that the Divine Source has for us and for all creation is what Berry calls in another place God’s “sabbatical pleasure.” God’s sabbatical pleasure. What a great way to conceive of a love that is unconditional, that doesn’t require anything of us.

You see, Walter Bruggemann, in the book we’re reading on Monday evenings, said that “YHWH is a Sabbath-keeping God, which in fact ensures that restfulness not restlessness is at the center of our life (p.10) [either in our relationship with God and with the world…[divine rest] characterize[s] the God of creation, creation itself, and the creatures made in the image of the resting God (p.6), who “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.”

Our Jewish siblings, sometimes refer to ‘everlasting’ or ‘eternal’ life as a life of blessing. This life of blessings is our Sabbath-keeping God’s kind of life. However, those who share in *this* quality of life share also in God’s struggle with the death-dealing, violent, destructive, life-diminishing powers at work in the world. And do so by, mediating and expressing life-giving powers like love, peace, faith, and hope; but are also called to rest, to know that in our own creatureliness, our humanness, we have limits. So, be still, stop, and take refuge in God’s abundant “sabbatical pleasure,” even in us.

This is the eternal life that John talks about in his Gospel too. It’s the life of expansive love, compassion, goodness, truth, and grace that we are invited to step into and participate in right now. It’s constantly evolving, expanding and flowing into new places, but it ought not to ignore the need for Sabbath rest.

When we engage in the work of justice-seeking, peace-making and compassion we must also step into the rejuvenating power of God’s divine rest, so that our vision for the planet widens and deepens. So that our capacity for love and kindness and goodness grows. So that we might become more courageous, resilient, and active in the pursuit of justice and peace.

[PAUSE] **“**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

**Conclusion**

John 3:16 (or 17 for that matter) is not magic. The verse is not some talisman. It does, however, contain a mystery and a miracle. In it, we find the very core of the good news. God’s love for us and the whole created world, which is both deeper and wider than we could even imagine. And that God’s love is at the very center of both God’s action in the world, as well as God’s call to keep the Sabbath holy. God’s love is key to living a life of blessing and a life that blesses. So, my prayer for us today is that on our road towards Easter and the celebration of resurrection, we understand the expansive love of God in new and fresh ways, that we are willing to embody that world in this world, and that we find mercy and joy in living a life of blessing, that engages in both action and rest.

Amen.