

THE GOD WHO GIVES

(The Bible's Greatest Hits II, 3)

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Perhaps it has occurred to you that 1984 is not far away. Let us suppose that dread year of judgment has arrived. The first thing big brother does is to demand that all Bibles be destroyed. Christians, however, will be permitted to preserve a single verse. Which verse will they choose? My guess is that very many, perhaps a majority, would choose John 3:16.

"John Three Sixteen." The Salvation Army used to sing a song by that title on street corners. More graceful is Stainer's version of the text which you heard sung by our choir a few minutes ago. I suppose there is no more familiar choir anthem of its type and period. So far as I know John 3:16 is the only Bible verse you can find in a store front downtown. It is set out in large letters in the window of the Union Gospel Mission.

Surely this is one of the Bible's greatest hits. Not only is this a popular verse, but it has the virtue of summing up the whole New Testament in a handful of words. Luther called John 3:16 "the gospel in miniature." If John the Evangelist had entered one of those say-it-in-twenty-five-words-or-less contests, he could not have done better than this.

Yet how many sermons have you heard preached on this text in this church? Mr. Matter has been a member here for close to seventy years. After the service you may ask him whether he has heard a sermon preached here on John 3:16, and for every such sermon he recalls, I shall put a dollar in the collection.

If that is a safe wager - and I usually confine my bets to sure things - it could be made with equal security in a multitude of churches similar to ours. How do we explain this strange silence respecting so celebrated and decisive a passage? Some of the references I gave a moment ago help to supply the answer. The Salvation Army; the Union Gospel Mission. In the minds of many of us John 3:16 has become the badge and banner of the sort of evangelicalism from which most Congregational preachers parted company a long time ago. Today the rise of a new evangelicalism makes many of us even more reluctant to get involved with a passage like this. It is hard to think of John 3:16 without thinking at the same time of what a recent article in The Saturday Review calls "The Jesus Mania."

Yet here I am with this text in front of me. As usually happens when I plot a sermon series, the plotting is easier than the execution. To publish a list of titles and texts in advance makes a preacher look organized, but when he arrives at one of those assignments down the line, he may find that he has painted himself into a corner. A couple of weeks ago I panicked. I sent an S.O.S. to my friend, The Reverend Robert Moon. He is one of the leading preachers of the Methodist Church, a good, old fashioned, unreconstructed, social-gospeling liberal who usually prints up his sermons for distribution. I thought, "Bob Moon has been in the ministry a lot longer than I, and if anyone ever found the courage to preach a properly heretical sermon on John 3:16 and got away with it, he is the man."

But Bob, who is currently on sabbatical leave from his parish, wrote back to me saying, "I don't think I've done anything on John 3:16."

Well then, I stand here alone like Daniel among the lions. I am tempted to go after them with the sword of theology, but I think I shall try to bemuse them instead with a song. I shall approach my text not so much doctrinally as lyrically. And that is not unfitting, I think. For clearly the language here is highly symbolic, high metaphorical. When John uses such words as "life" and "light", he is not speaking as a biologist or as a luminologist. When he speaks of God's only born Son it is equally obvious that he does not speak as a geneticist. It would be absurd to take him literally. Yet it would be a mistake not to take him seriously. For he is saying in the only kind of way that it can be said the most important thing that anyone has had to say since God hung his lamps under the burnished firmament.

What comes first in this saying is that God so loved the world.

He loved the heavens and the earth, the night and the day.

He loved the plants yielding seed and the fruit trees bearing fruit.

He loved the wild goats in the high mountains and the badgers seeking refuge among the rocks.

He loved the young lions creeping forth for their prey and leviathan sporting in the depths of the sea.

And he loved man going forth to his work until evening.

He loved Abraham sojourning in the wilderness and Joseph captive in Egypt.

He loved the banished Moses alone on the hillside and the childless Hannah weeping by the altar at Shiloh.

God loved the world of our humanity in its strength.

He loved Miriam dancing the dance of liberation with her timbrel and David lifting up his harp with weeping, making of his grief the thing of beauty that lasts forever.

He loved Solomon digging mines and launching ships and the unnamed lovers who come away when the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in the land.

And God loved the world of our humanity in its perishing.

He loved the poor perishing of hunger in every village, and the sick perishing by the pool of Siloam, and the slaves perishing at the hands of their owners, and the soldiers perishing in perpetual warfare, the fearful and embittered perishing, the forsaken and rejected perishing.

God so loved the world, "so" meaning "in such a way." That is to say, it followed logically from the beginning of time that God so loved the world that he gave.

He gave his Son. He gave a man whose sonship was revealed not by power, nor by might, not by virtue of miracles from on high, but as Oscar Cullman observes, by the "obedient fulfillment /of/ his task." Put it another way and say that this man was at one with God in his love for the world both in its strength and in its weakness, both in its celebrating and in its perishing. Therefore, this man became God's love in action. He was bone of God's love and flesh of God's love for the world. He was God's Son.

God so loved the world that he gave his Son to grow up in a poor village, himself poor among the poor and himself oppressed among the oppressed.

God gave his Son to stand up in the local synagogue and call for the promised Year of Jubilee, for freeing the slave and canceling the debts that burdened the poor, for establishing a new ordering of human relationships.

God gave his Son then to be driven out of town and to go among the perishing teaching and healing, among the crippled and the leprous, among people too culturally deprived to understand the faith of their fathers, among people sick in mind and troubled in spirit, among people addicted to wrongdoing yet looking for release, among people worried about their relatives and friends. He went among day laborers, homemakers, government workers, professional soldiers, call girls, ministers and foreign visitors, all of whom were perishing.

And he said, "I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly."

Always in the Son of God there was the action of that love by which God so loved the world.

Then in the fullness of time God gave his Son to the Holy City, to the learned and the pious, to Judas and the priestly conspirators, to Pilate, to the mob, to the torturers, to the cross.

God delivered him up to die, for that is the double meaning hidden in the word "gave" here. God delivered him as Abraham delivered Isaac to the place of sacrifice. It is this old story that lies in the back of John's mind as he writes these words.

God gave Jesus to the cross.

So God gave him to the world.

And whatever we may make out of that, what Donald Baillie wrote about the world's reaction is certainly true.

"The crucifixion of Jesus set men thinking more than anything else that has ever happened in the life of the human race. And the most remarkable fact in the whole history of religious thought is this: that when the early Christians looked back and pondered on the dreadful thing that had happened, it made them think of the redeeming love of God." l.

Not simply of the love of Jesus, but of the love of God.

l. D. M. Bailey, God Was In Christ, p. 184.

But there is more. That whoever believes. There is the rub. There we seem to come to a narrowing. The love is for the whole world, but only those who believe receive life.

Well, it is important to take note of what is not said here. It is not said that anybody is excluded from the love of God. It is not even said that people may not receive the action of God's love in some other way. Nor is any theory offered as to how the death of Jesus alters the situation between God and the rest of us.

None of that is said. What is said is that God's giving of his Son does make a difference to those who take that giving seriously. The other John, the one who wrote the epistles, tells us that "God is love." This is a popular saying today. For some of us it is the sum and substance of religion. But taken out of context it is a very abstract saying. What the world needs is not the bare assertion that God is love. What the world needs is that love itself, that love concrete. The world needs to see it, to hear it, to touch it. That is how both Johns see the love of God coming to us in Jesus Christ. Can we then affirm that God is love and not believe in that love when we see it in action?

For love to be helpful, even the greatest of loves, there has to be a response. The deepest griefs in human relationships are not those that result from death. They are the griefs that come from the fact that love has fallen on deaf ears. It is offered, but it is not taken seriously. It is not believed.

We must believe the love God gives in his Son. We must believe that it is given to us. Yet it is clear that for John believing means something quite different from accepting a doctrinal formula. It is, as he puts it in his own special language, "coming into the light" and "doing what is true." Faith in Christ always means at the same time keeping faith with Christ. Believing that he is the love of God in action means sharing in that same action. "He who does not love does not know God," wrote the other John, "For God is love."

Should not perish but have eternal life. I must register this complaint against John. When you say something very big in twenty-five words or less you say too much for a single sermon. To try to do this last part justice - an impossible task in any event - would only give us mental indigestion. It is too many courses for one sitting. But this I will say because I think John would insist that it be said: eternal life is no mere post-mortem condition. Eternal life is now. Eternal life is what happens immediately when the love by which God loved the world and gave his son becomes our love too. Right now. Although we continue to perish, we are alive if we believe in the love of God.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The Duluth Public Library possesses a motley assortment of religious books that are shelved in a very odd order. Last week I came across down there an assortment of sermons by a motley collection of preachers. It seems that fifty years ago, in Lent of 1927, the International Advertising Association suggested that clergy all over the country preach on the theme, "If I had only one sermon to preach." Thousands accepted the challenge and

later that year Harpers put together a collection of such sermons by preachers of various denominational and theological orientations.

No sermon in this collection is based on John 3:16. But the opening sermon, prepared by John Fort Newton, arises out of the same impulse that moved John the evangelist. Near the end, Dr. Newton asks:

"What can words say, except it be that in a life like our own, disinfected of the things that make us hateful to ourselves and others, but duplicate of our weariness and woe, the 'love that moves the sun and all the stars' found focus and functioned in the life of man, dividing time into before and after, and transfiguring the weary weight of an unintelligible world with wonder, love and joy."

I don't know that words can say much more except to remind us that this love is costly, that it gives immensely and that if we would live by this love, we must give immensely too. "God so loved the world that he gave..." I cannot think of a better basis for the only sermon a person had to preach, or for following the lead of Richard Baxter whose couplet described his practice every Sunday of his long career:

"I preached as never sure to preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men."