

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason Glombicki
March 11, 2018

Today's gospel reading has, arguably, the most recognizable verse in the Bible. On a long car trip, I usually see it posted on a billboard. At sports games, I see it on a poster. In confirmation class, I had to memorize it. It's the infamous John 3:16. And, while today's translation from the New Revised Standard Version was decent, I want to offer you an alternative translation from the original Greek. It goes like this, "For this is the way God loved the cosmos: to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life."

I prefer this translation for a number of reasons. First, it clearly emphasizes the central aspect of love. We find that everything that follows is about God's incredible, boundless love for the universe. It does not begin with fear, intimidation, or obligation; rather, it starts with love.

Verse 16 goes on to explain *how* God shows this love, namely through God's Begotten One, that is Jesus, we discover "eternal life." Let's pause here for a moment. We Christians like to toss around the phrase "eternal life" like a ping pong balls at a frat party. Some think that eternal life refers to an afterlife often called heaven. However, John's gospel has a different idea in mind. When John uses the phrase "eternal life," he

communicates something similar to what the other gospels call the “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven.”

The phrases “eternal life,” “kingdom of God,” and “kingdom of heaven,” all communicate different metaphors for, what one scholar calls, “the change in human existence that is made possible by believing in Jesus.”¹ You see, eternal life is not some future place; instead, God’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, and eternal life all speak to something in the present. They speak about a change in Wicker Park and across the globe. Today, these metaphors offer us a partnership with God for the good of the cosmos.

Hear John 3:16 once more: “For this is the way God loved the cosmos: to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life.”

But, wait, there’s another word that sometimes trips us like an old rug, namely “believe.” Some Christians use the word “believe” to ask us what we cognitively understand to be true before bestowing Christian credentials. John’s gospel, however, is less concerned with your opinion since he *always* uses “believe” as an action verb. That is, in John, belief is something we do and it’s not something we passively assert. Now, hold on to that idea while we add one more layer.

In verse 19, we discovered the basis for judgment. Listen to today’s reading again starting at verse 19 using the New English Translation: “Now this is the basis for judging: that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil deeds hate the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed. But the one who practices

¹ W. Hulitt Gloer. *Feasting on the Word*. Year B, Vol 2. p117-121.

the truth comes to the light so that it may be plainly evident that [their] deeds have been done in God.”

I’m fascinated by what was and what was not mentioned as a basis for judging. There was not a list about what you should or shouldn’t eat. God didn’t reveal a catalog of bad words to never ever say. We didn’t hear anything about sex or sexuality. Rather, Jesus stated that teaching and leading with truth brings eternal life. You see, in John, eternal life originates when we enact God’s values of transparency and honesty.

Yet, in our society truth is often veiled. It’s actively silenced using non-disclosure agreements, money, or fear. Truth is whitewashed when businesses launder money and skirt environmental and social ethics. Instead of working through disagreements, we sometimes withhold information to avoid conflict. At times, we vainly alter our appearance to reject our unique beauty and dismiss God’s beautiful gift of maturation. When it’s all said and done, we avoid truth thinking that it will bring us happiness and life.

However, today we are invited to “believe” in Jesus. We are challenged to see belief as an active verb by enacting God’s transparency and truth. And, we’ve begun to see the in-breaking of God’s eternal life as women come forward to connect the phrase “me too” to their silenced stories. Businesses have been pressured into greater transparency as consumer’s push them to recognize truth. We’ve seen it with stricter gun policies at some stores, we’ve seen grocery stores creatively use or donate expiring food, and we’ve seen the emergence of organic, fair trade, and locally-sourced goods. You see, our God yearns for transparency, and our God values truth shared in love for the good of the cosmos.

With that in mind, I invite you take out the postcard in your bulletin. On one side we've stamped the church's return address, and I invite you to write your full mailing address on that side. On the other side, ponder an answer to this question: "What might you do this week to partner with God to create a world of truth-filled transparency?" Or, in other words, what is God calling you to bring to light this week? What truth needs to be told in an effort to experience eternal life? Maybe it's a truth for yourself, an organization, or another individual. Take a moment to write your address on the one side and an answer on the other. (Silence.)

Later during the service we'll have you place the postcard in the offering plate and offer it as a way to actively engage John's understanding of "believe." At some point in the week ahead, we'll send you this postcard. When you get it, I hope it reminds you to engage in transparency and truth, I pray that you'll remember that our God loves you and the whole cosmos, and I have a hunch that as you follow Jesus's example you will experience eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.