

I Give My Heart To  
Fourth Sunday of Lent  
March 10, 2024  
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

'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.' This familiar verse hinges on the meaning of the word, 'believe.' It comes from the Latin word 'credo' which is usually translated, 'I believe.' A more accurate translation of credo is, 'I give my heart to.'

An author posed the question, 'How would the Nicene Creed feel different to us if everywhere it says 'we believe,' we instead said, 'we give our heart to.' Well likewise, John 3:16 would become:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever *gives her heart to* him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

That changes everything. Instead of belief being a passive, intellectual affirmation that Jesus exists, and is even the son of God, belief becomes an action, a commitment, a way of life. It becomes giving one's whole heart – one's whole being – to Jesus. Quite honestly, it becomes a lot harder.

The scripture then becomes much more than a personal plan of salvation that emphasizes reward or punishment in an after-life with little impact on how we live now. Instead of being about the salvation of *individuals*. John 3:16 invites us to live and journey *together* as a Christian community of mutual salvation. It no longer over-simplifies the Gospel message, but calls us to live the complexity of Scripture as a whole to be grappled with over a lifetime.

My previous understanding of John 3:16 was just *too easy*. Yes, we can affirm that Jesus exists and is the Son of God. And then we can go on living our lives any way we choose. Belief becomes a small subcategory of who we are rather than that which defines our whole heart and mind.

John 3:16 occurs near the end of a late-night conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus begins their conversation by saying, 'We know you are a teacher who has come from God.' But Jesus expects more from him than this assertion. He invites Nicodemus to be born from above. Jesus calls him, and us, to a rebirth of our entire being.

Nicodemus later experiences that rebirth when he courageously stands up for Jesus and demands that he deserves a hearing from the authorities condemning him and he deserves to be heard by everyone. At the end of Jesus's earthly life, it was Nicodemus who joined Joseph of Arimathea in tenderly taking care of the body of Jesus after his brutal death. For Nicodemus, that late-night conversation with Jesus stayed with him all his life and changed his way of being.

Jesus begins John 3:16 with the words, 'For God.' This lets us know from the start that it is God who initiates, not us. It hearkens us back to creation and a realization that it is God who creates, and now it is God who seeks to re-create us. It reminds us, too, that first and foremost, salvation is the activity of God. Salvation is not something that we store up for ourselves, It is a fluid activity in which we join Jesus in saving others from the inhumanity we face in today's world.

The next words are 'so loved.' God's very nature is to love. John later writes, 'God is love.' God did not just set creation in motion and then become indifferent to it. God is personally engaged in our lives and deeply cares about us. God weeps over us and intervenes for us and with us.

'the world' – God cares about this world, as messy as it is. And God cares about the whole world. This is a message to and for everyone. It is not just for those who intellectually affirm a given set of propositions. Instead, Jesus's love for the whole world is best expressed in one of our prayers of mission:

'Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your *arms of love*  
on the hard wood of the cross  
that *everyone* might come within the reach  
of your saving *embrace*:  
So clothe us in your Spirit that we,  
*reaching forth our hands in love*,  
may bring those who do not know you  
to the knowledge and love of you;

for the honor of your Name.'

The next words in John 3:16 are 'he gave his only begotten Son' – Jesus is God's ultimate gift of love. God, in essence, is giving God's self to us and for us. The passage hearkens us to reflect on what gifts we are sending out into our world, perhaps beginning by sharing the innate kindness within each of ourselves.

'that whosoever' – It doesn't matter who you are, where you live, what color you are, or what faith you claim or whether you don't claim any. Karl Rahner, a German theologian, called Jesus the "universal offer of grace" to all of humanity.

'believeth in him' – We are invited to respond to this gift that we have been given. We come to understand belief or credo as not just an intellectual acceptance of Jesus' offer, but as a way of life that continually reshapes our character. We believe in Jesus by belonging to Jesus and longing for Jesus and each other.

'should not perish' – This isn't just talking about an after-life. There is a sense in which we perish now when we are separated from God or from each other. When we are not reconciled with God and those around us, our lives lack meaning, lack hope, and lack the deep connection for which we all long.

God does not want us to perish, 'but have everlasting life' – Everlasting life begins now! And part of our call is to join Jesus in bringing heaven to earth right here and right now.

This season of Lent is a time to confess and re-confess the touchstone passages, like John 3:16, that guide us on our journey with God. We are over halfway through these forty days. We are now making the turn toward following the steps of Jesus toward the cross and toward the promise he gives us of resurrection hope at Easter.

'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.'

Seen through new eyes, this familiar passage can become an exciting way of life. It becomes the lifelong path where we give *our whole heart* to Jesus and to each other.

*Amen.*