

1 John 4:7-21

John 3:16-21

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus
THE GOSPEL IN MINIATURE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The first National Football League playoff game to be played according to new overtime scoring rules was on January 8, 2012. The home-team Denver Broncos, 8-8 during the regular seasons, hosted the highly favored 12-4 Pittsburgh Steelers.

Tied 23-23 at the end of regulation, the Broncos got the ball first in overtime. On the first play, the Broncos' quarterback threw to his receiver at the Broncos' 39-yard line. The receiver stiff-armed one defender, then outran the backup safety and scored the game winning touchdown. The entire play took just 11 seconds, and the Broncos upset the Steelers 29-23.

Here are some interesting facts about that exciting playoff game:

- * The winning quarterback passed for a total of 316 yards.
- * The winning quarterback threw 10 passes, for an average of 31.6 yards.
- * The TV ratings, which peaked during the (brief) overtime, were 31.6% of U.S. households.
- * The Steelers' time of possession for the game was 31:06.
- * The Steelers' quarterback threw the game's only interception, on third and sixteen.

The winning quarterback was Tim Tebow, the University of Florida quarterback who won college football's Heisman Trophy as a sophomore in 2007. Tim Tebow received a lot of attention during his college playing career, not only for his performance on the football field, but also because of his outspoken Christian faith. During the 2009 college football championship game, he wore the message "John 3:16" on his eye black. After the game, John 3:16 became the most "Googled" phrase, with 90 million searches. That is one reason why, three years later, the Broncos-Steelers playoff game result and stats received so much attention, with all of the 3:16 references.

Did you know the In-and-Out hamburger chain in the American Southwest prints "John 3:16" on the inside rim on the bottom of its drink cups? Or that the clothing chain Forever 21 prints John 3:16 on the bottom of its bright yellow bags? You may never have heard of a guy named Rollen Stewart, but some of you may remember seeing a guy in a rainbow-colored Afro wig holding up a "John 3:16" sign at NFL games and other high-profile sporting and cultural events in the 1970's and 1980's. Stewart's sign got him a lot of attention, but his personal story isn't quite consistent with the message of John 3:16. He is currently serving three life terms in a California prison for

abducting a hotel maid and holding her hostage for nine hours, while plastering John 3:16 signs on the hotel room windows.¹

Have you ever wondered why John 3:16 has been called the most beloved Bible verse? Is it just because it is so short and easy to memorize? Or is there something else going on here? The great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, called John 3:16 “the heart of the Bible, the gospel in miniature” or “the gospel in a nutshell.” And so it is . . .

“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.”

John 3:16 shows up on a college athlete’s eye black — on the bottom rim of a fast-food cup — on the bottom of a clothing store’s bags — on a wild football fan’s poster board sign. There it stands, all by itself. But that’s not how it appears in the Bible in John’s gospel. John 3:16 is not a page all by itself. John 3:16 is not a book of the Bible all by itself. We may print John 3:16 on bumper stickers and cross stitch it on fabric and wear it on necklaces and bracelets, but the verse, as popular as it is, doesn’t stand by itself in John’s gospel.

The University of Florida football team’s trainer might not have had enough eye black for Tim Tebow to write John 3:14-21, certainly not the actual verses themselves. In-and-Out probably would have to sell supersize, mega-large drinks to write all of the verses on the bottom inside rim. Forever 21 would have to hope that shoppers would buy enough clothes to fill up several bags so they could print all of the verses.

John 3:16 is a beautiful verse that usually gets quoted by itself, but it’s part of a much larger and longer conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night,” in the dark (literally and figuratively?) to talk to him about the signs Jesus had been doing. In their theological back and forth, the two men talk about the presence of God, the kingdom of God, being born from above or being born again, and the Holy Spirit.

It’s said that, in real estate, it’s all about “Location, Location, Location.” In a sense, the same can be said about reading and understanding the Bible, only we might use the word “Context” (which really sort of means the same thing): “It’s all about Context, Context, Context.”

Listen to what Jesus tells Nicodemus just before John 3:16: “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” Jesus wasn’t writing bumper sticker theology when he said John 3:16. His words about God’s love for this world follow right on the heels of Jesus talking about God’s grace and action in his people’s lives always.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” John 3:16 begins with an adverb, “in this way, thus, so, in the same way, like this . . .” “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent . . . in this way/thus/so/in the same way/like this, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son . . .”

That's probably why Martin Luther called this verse "The Gospel in miniature." God didn't just send his Son into the world to be his mouthpiece, to deliver the message "God loves you!" John 3:16 says, "God **gave** his Son, his **only** Son . . ." That word, "gave," suggests that Jesus' mission involved much more than just preaching and teaching about God's love. Jesus **is** God's love — and not just for the religious people, not just for the "respectable" people, not just for the Christians, not just for us. "God so loved the **world**."

Today's epistle lesson is from the first letter of John. It's something like a commentary on the gospel lesson: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:9-10)

Because "Context, Context, Context" is so important, we need to listen to what comes after John 3:16, especially John 3:17 (that would be a good verse to put on your eye black or bumper): "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Listen to the **action** verbs that describe what God has done for us and for the world: God **loved**, God **gave**, God **sent**. God has done something great in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ shows us how great and loving and gracious God really is. The judgment — our judgment? — comes from not believing, from not walking in the light, from not doing our deeds in God, from living for ourselves instead of for and through Jesus Christ, from choosing to live in the dark rather than to walk in the light.

The gospel of John is famous for its contrasts and symbolism. In these six short verses surrounding and including John 3:16, I found six contrasts that John uses to send his message about what God has done in Jesus Christ: perish/eternal life . . . condemn/save . . . believe/not believe . . . light/darkness . . . evil/truth . . . evil deeds/works in God. Who would have thought the most popular and beloved verse in the New Testament — probably in the whole Bible — would be one that leads us directly to talk about God's judgment? But, notice that the judgment comes as a result of **God's great love for the world, a love so great that he gave his only Son**. It's like what the old hymn says, "O love that wilt not let me go . . ."

Dr. David Lose is a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is a frequent and regular blogger to day1.org, which also includes sermons and video and audio resources. In a blog, he wrote about the time he preached on John 3:14-21 and talked about God's unrelenting love for us in Jesus Christ. When he gave his Son for us — and that includes when Jesus died for us — God put a claim on our lives without asking our permission or opinion. Dr. Lose said it's as if God said, "I love you, like it or not!" He compared John 3:16 to infant baptism. He said, "But that's the heart of infant Baptism, when you think of it: God just plain adopts us, makes us God's own, and pledges to be both with us and for us forever."

He continued, “Perhaps we should add four words to our service of Baptism to highlight the scandalous, even offensive, nature of the sacrament: ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit . . . *like it or not!*’”

But the story doesn’t end with Dr. Lose’s sermon. A couple of weeks after he preached about John 3:14-21, a member of the congregation named Tom told him about putting his six-year old son, Benjamin, to bed a few night earlier. I’ll let Dr. Lose finish the story: “Benjamin protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father’s refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, ‘Daddy, I hate you!’ Tom replied, ‘I’m sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you.’ And then what do you think Benjamin said? ‘Oh, it’s okay.’ Or maybe, ‘Sorry, Dad. I love you too.’ Nope. When Tom told his son he loved him, Benjamin yelled back, ‘Don’t say that!’ Surprised, Tom continued, ‘But, Ben, but it’s true — I love you.’ ‘Don’t say that, Daddy.’ ‘But I love you, Ben.’ ‘Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now.’ And then it came, Tom reported, almost completely unbidden: ‘Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you . . . like it or not!’”

Dr. Lose says, “And there it is in a nutshell: God in Jesus has made God’s decision . . . and it is **for** us. Yes, we can run. But we can’t change the fact that God loves us, that God in fact loves the whole world more than we can imagine.”²

There it is in a nutshell. There it is, the Gospel in miniature: “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.”

Like it or not!

But what’s not to like?

Let us pray: Loving God, giver of all light and life, you sent Jesus Christ into the world not to condemn but to save. Help us to lift up the light of Christ so that the world might believe in him and receive the gift of eternal life; through Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

NOTES

¹I gleaned this information from numerous sources: “Rollen Stewart” and the information about the 3:16 connections with the playoff game on wikipedia.com; the information about the playoff game itself from www.scores.espn.go.com and “Explain It to Me: John 3:16,” by Eric Marrapodi, CNN Belief Blog at www.religion.blogs.cnn.com; and about Rollen Stewart from “John 3:16: Where Is He Now?” by Monte Burke at www.forbes.com/2009/11/12.

²The Rev. Dr. David Lose, “Like It or Not: John 3:14-21,” at www.day1.org.