

John 3:16 - A Reprise

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, March 20, 2011, The Second Sunday in Lent.*

Based on John 3:1-17.

*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. John
3:16 from the King James Version of the Bible.*

It truly is not an exaggeration to say that I have spent years parsing this verse. Certainly it is one of and probably the first bible verse I ever learned by heart, as we say. John 3:16 is memorable for all sorts of troubling reasons. It is the kind of statement that defines orthodoxy, reducing it to a tidy, definitive, and unambiguous sound bite; and for those in search of a closed religious system, there is no better option than this verse. Among the religious right, it is not to be messed with.

Just ask Pastor Rob Bell. You may not know that name; I didn't until it hit the blogosphere this week. Though this is probably a fault of mine and certainly nothing of which to be particularly proud, I don't read many religious books of any ilk; the certainty of most of them gets on my nerves and the others I am jealous that I didn't write. So to be honest a book written by Mr. Bell, the pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, would not likely pop up on my recommended Amazon list, that list created by mysterious little Amazon gnomes who think they know what I should want to read next. The fact that they are often correct troubles me.

I have come to understand that Mr. Bell is a bit of a Christian rock star in the world of such preachers. His new book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, is not even out yet but has already created a maelstrom. Here is the offending quote as I understand it: "What we believe about heaven and hell is incredibly important because it exposes what we believe about who God is and what God is like," Bell says and then adds the incriminating tag: "the good news is that love wins." According to his critics, the always-vigilant defenders of orthodoxy, this amounts to nothing less than the heresy of universalism. Apparently in Rob Bell's world being known as one who believes that all eventually make it into heaven, which is the essential claim of universalism, is the kiss of death. I hope he survives it, and I think he will.

It is remarkable that this conversation, albeit, and happily a relatively small one, occurred during the same week that the world has watched with growing horror the events in Japan. Most people in Japan are Shintoists or Buddhists, which is to say that most do not profess to believe that Jesus is the only Son of God. No big news there. Let's be honest: most of us—not all, but most—are Christians because we grew up in a culture that has the Christian story as its principal religious myth. Had we been born and reared in Japan, about 99% of us would not be Christian. For me that understanding, far from troubling, me deepens my understanding about ultimate truth and our pursuit of it.

With all that in mind today, I have chosen to read John 3:1-17 with a different heart, a heart I confess made heavy by the tragedies occurring in the world. As I finished writing yesterday, I began to see, as all of us did, the all too familiar sight of missiles headed toward Libya. And on it goes. On another occasion, if I must, I can exegete this famous passage from John for you—or you can do it yourself with a good commentary. But today, truthfully, it seems irresponsible to spend time explaining away the sectarianism and down right meanness that have flowed from this passage when what I need to hear—and forgive me for the assumption, but what I expect you also need to hear—is the unmistakable promise in these words that God loves us, indeed that God loves the whole world, this fragile island home we call the globe.

The events which have occurred and continue to occur in Japan have shaken us, shaken us maybe particularly in the first world more than anything has in a long time. The legendary preparedness of Japan and her people no doubt prevented even more disastrous outcomes; and yet despite that, we who are perched so high on the global feeding chain have seen

firsthand how vulnerable we are—even we with the highest standard of living—in the face of nature and the production of nuclear energy. And it leaves us uneasy, reminding us that we live our lives pretending—as maybe we must—that we are not dancing on the abyss, only to be reminded that in a matter of seconds all that was solid has split apart. And then suddenly an event 7000 miles away acutely unnerves us about a nuclear power plant a few miles up the river in Westchester County. Bob Herbert’s questions in his op-ed piece in the Times yesterday were not new ones but ones with particular poignancy: when is the cost of good clean nuclear energy just too high?

That is a big question, and I make no claims about its answer. Though it seems that our questions get bigger and bigger with higher and higher stakes, in truth, making sense of the world has never been easy; the man in today’s gospel, Nicodemus, came in purity or not but certainly in some sense in search of answers, of an understanding of how the world worked and how to find God in it. Of all the preaching points to be gleaned from Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, I find the lingering sense of Jesus as a mystic most affecting, particularly today. Even what he is remembered to have said through the agenda and lens of John’s community two generations later remains mystical. The center pin in the passage, at least for me, is Jesus’ claim that the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

Nothing about this scripture invites spiritual arrogance or certitude. Only God is certain. That quality of this writing makes it particularly appealing to me today. It is ironic that this passage has been used to transform an inscrutable man, Jesus, into the cornerstone of a system of doctrinal precision. How did it happen that Jesus, the master of the mysterious, became the basis of clear answers so utterly correct, correct enough to die defending even in their most arcane interpretation against others considered to be so desperately wrong? How can it be that Jesus, so open-ended, filled with imagination and metaphor, has been recreated by the church as one who came to establish a religion rather than a way of life?

Part of our hope in carrying this wonderful faith forward lies in our ability to reclaim the broadness of Jesus’ message. We can no longer pretend to be bound by archaic scripture when our call is to follow the Christ whom we encounter in scripture but who lives beyond the scripture in our hearts and souls, still at work transforming the people of God. That truth has never seemed any truer than it does now. Disasters like the one we are living with Japan— and it is ours, too, for now no disaster is entirely someone else’s—make mystics of us all, at the least causing us to pose the question of God and how and where God is in a world like this one. How can this be, Nicodemus wondered. How indeed? At its best, when life is most uncertain, our faith opens us to the world rather than giving us a narrower version of it. The wind blows where the wind blows. Jesus, the one who is my path to God, the one whose life and way open the widest access to God for me, refuses to be pinned down, refuses to be contained by those who in the best efforts want to contain him.

It is not a perfect answer to the world’s problems. But it is the best I have. Who of us can catch the wind? Who of us can hold it in her hands? None of us, not a single one of us can. But we can feel the breeze and we can hear it, for the wind blows where it chooses; and if we have ears and hearts to listen, in its movement we can hear again and again its whisper: love wins, love wins, love always wins.

Yesterday morning strolling in my neighborhood I walked through the cemetery and exhibit at St. Paul’s Chapel, looking at the pictures of the first responders during the days following 9/11. I have walked by a thousand times but never taken the time to go in. But this time I did, and I found myself thinking of the workers in the Fukushima plant. Like our beloved firefighters who ran into the towers, these men and women are likely giving, certainly risking, their lives for others. Their actions define their faith more than any label and our witnessing it brings us to our knees in thanksgiving and awe.

For God so loved the world and in the end love always wins.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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