

“Unbelievably True; Undeniably Real”

John 3:14-21

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How is God’s love different from ours? This is a question we need to consider today because of our text, which contains one of the most familiar verses in the entire New Testament, John 3:16.

This verse is so popular it shows up at many sporting events on shirts, caps and banners. Many of you recall that John 3:16 was one of the most often used biblical references Tim Tebow etched into his eye black patches when he played football at the University of Florida and in the National Football League.

I wonder if the writers of the fourth gospel had any idea how significant John 3:16 would be to future believers. Do you think they were as impressed with it as we are? I think they probably were.

This morning I want to examine this verse, which is a small part of a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus was a Jewish leader who was responsible for interpreting and teaching the Torah, and he approached Jesus one night to discuss religion.

It appears Nicodemus was trying to figure out what a life of faith looked like, and Jesus was helping him to understand a faithful person was one who traded the world’s values for God’s. This transformation was equivalent to being born again, a radical reorientation of thinking, believing and living, which Jesus wisely taught and faithfully modeled.

John 3:16 is part of the second portion of the conversation Jesus had with this inquiring student of the Law. By this time, the conversation had shifted from a dialogue to a monologue, with only Jesus talking.

We do not know exactly how or when Jesus uttered these words, but at some point they made their way into this conversation and were preserved by those who composed this gospel.

What do you think the writers of this gospel wanted their readers to understand about God? I believe they wanted them to know how much God loved all that God created, including the land and all who inhabited it.

I believe they want us to realize this, too. So let me pose the opening question again this morning. **How is God's love different from ours?**

As covenant people, we also love all God created. What is really different about God's love, especially his love for us and our family members and neighbors?

I pondered this question for some time last week and want to share some ideas for you to consider. Let me share them with you.

How is God's love different from ours? To begin, it is more inclusive. God loves not only those who love him but even those who do not.

In our culture, we are more accustomed to trading love than giving it away. We trade love with those who are like us and those who like us.

If someone is good to us, we are usually good to them. If they friend us on Facebook, we reciprocate. If they go out of their way to help us, we lend them a helping hand when they need it. If they do business with us, we patronize them.

There is nothing wrong with trading love. It is one way community is formed.

It just happens to be the easy way, though. Anyone can love the loveable without much effort.

It is another matter to love those who don't love you and treat you with respect and dignity. There is nothing easy about this, and we can think of a thousand reasons not to do it.

So could God, but God doesn't. Based upon the life and ministry of Jesus, who was sent by God to reflect God's heart and nature, God refuses to write people off or turn his back on those who turn their back on him. Instead, God reaches out to them time and time again hoping to develop a warm, loving, trusting and meaningful relationship.

"For God so loved the **world**..."

The word used for world in this verse, kosmos, refers most often in scripture to those who are at odds with God and Jesus, trying to undermine their redemptive work. God loves these people as much as he loves those who have opened their hearts and lives to him and his son. The God revealed to humans through the words and actions of Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds.

Never before had the world known a love this deep and wide. Never would the world be the same once it was uniquely revealed through Jesus. God's radically inclusive love is a game changer!

Whatever you have done that makes you ashamed, it has not moved you beyond the reach of God. God still loves you and earnestly desires a close relationship with you. God's arms are open to receive you if you will humbly turn to him for forgiveness and guidance.

At the same time, God's radically inclusive love presents us with a challenge. If God's love has no boundaries, how can ours?

Who have you decided not to love? Who do you feel it is ok to treat disrespectfully? How do you justify this in light of God's steadfast love for us and God's unceasing attempts to reconcile with us? Who gave you permission to draw boundaries around your love?

Each time you draw those boundaries tighter, your world gets smaller and darker. Is this really the way you want to live? Is this how you want to die?

How is God's love different from ours? It is more generous.

"For God so loved **the world** that **he gave his one and only son...**" the writers penned.

Don't overlook the significance of that word, *gave*. This is the only time in the fourth gospel this word is used in reference to Jesus. The more common expression is that God "sent" Jesus on a mission to this world to underscore God's love for the world.

"For God so loved **the world** that **he gave his one and only son...**"

Love and generosity naturally go together, don't they? We want to give to those we love, and we find great joy in giving.

So, it is not God's giving nature which is noteworthy. It is the value of the gift God gives to those he loves.

God gave to this world, both to those who embraced him and those who did not, the most precious gift he knew to give, his own Son. Why would God do this?

All the previous prophets God sent to call people to repent of their sins and turn from their wicked ways were rejected and mistreated. For the most part, even the religious leaders refused to listen to God's ambassadors.

This left God with only two options. God could send his own Son to reveal his heart and nature and to show people a new and better way to live, or God could quit loving all God had

created and let the world spin out of control as people's evil deeds enveloped them in darkness. What did God decide?

"For God so loved **the world** that **he gave his one and only son...**" This sacrifice redefines love and generosity.

Have you ever come close to achieving this level of generosity? What do you have which could make a difference in someone's life if you shared it? Why haven't you already? Do you love it more than them?

How is God's love different from ours? It is more powerful and transformative.

"For God so loved **the world** that **he gave** his one and only son, that whoever believes in him **shall not perish but have everlasting life.**"

God's love changes everything it touches and makes it better. Everything. This is because God reverses the destructive power of sin and brings the best out in people.

God doesn't condemn people and leave them in hopeless despair, but God shows them a new and better way to live and leads them in that direction. In other words, God replaces condemnation with salvation.

When this occurs, God's transforming Spirit helps people choose light over dark, good over evil, truth over deception, humility over arrogance, healing over hurting, love over hate, generosity over selfishness, patience over intolerance, justice over revenge, peace over war, bridges of understanding, goodwill and reconciliation over walls of suspicion and hate, and life over death.

No wonder the writers of the fourth gospel were impressed with God's love and had to let us know. It really was different from human love, more inclusive, generous and powerful.

It is one thing, however, to talk about God's love; it is another to experience it. Have you?

Have you let God embrace you, forgive you and include you in the family of faith? Do you allow God to love you each day? Are you letting God transform you daily into the image of Christ?

If not, trust God and invite God into your heart and life. Let God lead you as you move forward. As unbelievably true as God's love is, it is undeniably real as Jesus revealed through his life and ministry.

The writers of this gospel make it very clear. When you receive Jesus, you receive the transforming gift of God's love. Will you believe in Jesus today and follow him?

For those who have experienced God's love and are on this faith journey, are you an agent of God's inclusive, generous and transforming love?

Who needs you to love them the way God loves them? Whose life could be transformed because you treat them differently than most of the people around them?

Incarnation is the embodiment of love. You can't love people from a distance, at least not the way Jesus did.

Do you need to redouble your efforts this week to be the presence of Christ at home, at work or where you go to school by bringing life and hope into your relationships?

I hope so, and I know who will help you.