

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

A little over a month ago, I preached a sermon on that famous verse from Micah 6, reminding us that God wants us to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” And I said that we often treat that passage as a rule to follow, as something we are capable of doing. But I also said that Micah doesn’t treat it that way, because the book of Micah doesn’t end there. I said then that something similar is true of John 3:16, but I promised that I would save that for the second Sunday in Lent. And here we are.

John 3:16 is surely one of the most well-known and often quoted verses in all of the Bible. And if you wanted to sum up the Christian faith using only one verse, that would not be the worst one to choose. In fact it’s a pretty good one. But no one is forcing us to choose only one verse. And I would advise us not to do that, because it can be misleading.

Here’s the verse, standing on its own. “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.” God sent Jesus to save the world from perishing and to give us eternal life. That sounds like pretty good news, doesn’t it? But there seems to be a catch. It’s not just *anyone* who gets those good things. It’s whoever *believes* in Jesus. Okay, we think, that doesn’t seem unreasonable. We can be saved from perishing and live forever and all we have to do is believe? That’s amazing! What do we have to lose?

There was a famous French physicist and philosopher named Blaise Pascal, born 400 years ago this year, who noticed this dynamic about the Christian faith, and came up with the famous “Pascal’s wager.” In an age when science was on the rise and religion was beginning to be called into question – including the very existence of God – Pascal made a logical argument for being a Christian. He argued that it is a safer bet to assume that there *is* a God than to assume there isn’t. His reasoning went like this. If you assume the existence of God and follow the tenets of the Christian faith and that proves to be wrong, if God doesn’t exist and Christianity is useless, well you haven’t really lost much in being wrong about that. If, on the other hand, you assume that God *doesn’t* exist and *that* turns out to be wrong, well then you’re in “a whole heap o’ trouble.”

There are three major problems with this whole approach. The first is that “assuming that God exists” is not what Jesus means in John 3:16 by “believing in God.” I’ve talked about this problem before. It’s a translation problem for us English speakers. We have three words in English that we use to translate a single word in Greek: faith, trust, and belief, and only two of those can be turned in to verbs. But that single word in Greek can be turned into a verb, and always includes the idea of trusting in and counting on the object of one’s faith. It’s not just that God exists. That is assumed. It’s trusting and hoping in God and God’s ways, especially when those ways go against the ways of the world. Pascal missed that faith in this sense is not a simple detached calculation, like a sensible investment strategy. It in fact involves a risky reorientation of one’s life and values.

The second problem is that Jesus does not drop the mic after verse 16, or even after verse 17, where today’s Gospel reading is supposed to end, according to the lectionary. I added verses 18 through 21. Because what Jesus says *next*, after verse 17, challenges in the strongest terms our presumption that “believing” in Jesus is simple and straightforward, that we are willing and able to keep what we see as our part of the bargain. John 3:16 cannot stand on its own because John

3:19 is lurking just around the corner. Yes, God gave the Son so that we may not perish. Yes, God wants us to trust the Son and have eternal life. But guess what? “This is the judgment,” says Jesus, “that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” God *wants* us to trust the gospel promise in verse 16, but the truth is that we *don't*. And not just that we don't. We don't even *want* to. We've gotten used to how things work here in the dark, and have learned to use the darkness to our advantage. We like it in the dark, if we're honest, and we are annoyed by the light. So where does *that* leave us?

It gets worse. The third problem with sticking only with John 3:16 and presuming that believing (or trusting) is our part of the bargain is this: believing is not something we are *able* to do on our own, even if we were inclined to (which, as I've said, we're not.) Faith is a gift of God, worked in us by the Holy Spirit, when the promise of the gospel is made to us. And that is not simple or straightforward. You only need to look at the example of Jesus' original disciples to recognize that. They were continually getting in wrong, continually trying to impose the values of the world on Jesus, as when Peter tries to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to die. “Get behind me, Satan,” he tells him. “You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.” But Jesus does not give up on his foolish and slow-to-believe disciples. He brings them along with him to Jerusalem, to witness his arrest and crucifixion, and then to experience his resurrection.

This is where John 3:16 and John 3:19 are leading us, to the cross and beyond, as the means by which God will save the world by creating faith and trust in us. At the end of John's Gospels, after Jesus' resurrection, his disciples come to believe in him, one by one, by seeing and touching him after his is raised. As I reminded you a month ago, it's not only Thomas who doubts, who sees and believes. But Jesus blesses them anyway and breathes the Spirit on them so that they can go and be agents of God's promise. And then he blesses *us* and the church in our time, those who have not seen, but yet believe. That's why John wrote it all down, he tells us, so that people like us may come to believe in Jesus and to trust his promises, not the least of which is life, life as God intended life to be. So you see, all of these stories end with God's promise, which is our only hope.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus does not give up on his disciples, and he does not give up on us, ever. Count on that. Count on it because it will allow you to face the uncomfortable truth that John 3:19 reveals about you, and me too, that we too often love the darkness rather than the light, that our deeds, our actions and our failures to act, individually and collectively, are often evil. Count on it because that annoying light is not content to leave us in our darkness. That light shines in the darkness, as John promises right at the beginning of his Gospel, and the darkness will not overcome it. Count on that. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.