

## The Gospel In Miniature

John 3:1-17

February 10, 2008

Not a baseball or football season goes by when at some point the TV camera pans out over the stadium and there, usually up in the nosebleed seats, a solitary individual stands holding up a sign that says “John 3:16.” “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.” Martin Luther called this verse “the gospel in miniature.” When coupled with John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me,” this verse has often been used as a litmus test for who’s in and who’s out; who’s saved and who’s not; who God loves and who God doesn’t love.

Such behavior illustrates our unfortunate tendency to boil faith down, to reduce the gracious, open and infinite promises of God to slogans, , single verses of scripture, or bumper sticker phrases, such as “God said it; I believe it; that settles it.” But whenever we do this, we are declaring for all the world to see not only our certainty and confidence, but also, dare I say, our arrogance that we know all there is to know about God—at least all that’s worth knowing, the really important stuff. We alone have the secret knowledge, the inside track, the short cut home.

The widespread contemporary use of this statement in such a narrow and literal way is especially ironic in light of the fact that Jesus offers it as the culmination of a long discussion with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a man who confidently thought he too knew all the important information about God. God, in Nicodemus’s theology, is without surprise or newness; there are limits to divine action, how God can and cannot act in the world. There are unchanging truths about human life; we are born, we live, we die. Certain things are possible, others are impossible. God is awesome, magnificent, and perfectly predictable. God has always acted in certain ways and God will always continue to act in those same, certain ways.

Jesus spends his entire time with Nicodemus demonstrating to him that he doesn’t know as much as he thinks he knows, and that in the presence of God, certainty is perhaps not the greatest of virtues. He tells the puzzled man, “The wind of God’s spirit blows where it chooses and it is beyond your knowing.”

There is one thing in the mystery that is God that we can know, and that is that God loves the world, and that in Jesus we can see how that love operates in the world. It is easy to translate John’s assertion about this, without even thinking, into “God so loves the people who inhabit the planet Earth.” But that’s not what it says, and even in the modern translations or paraphrases, no one says it that way. Even Eugene Peterson in *The Message* begins “This is how much God loved the world.”

I have only a passing familiarity with Greek – a word here or there. But the Greek word John uses, and we translate, as “world”, is “kosmos.” And “kosmos” then as now refers to the universe, the orderly, harmonious, whole of creation, that which has come out of the chaos. There are two other words that John could have used, but doesn’t. One is “oikoumene” which meant “inhabitants of the earth,” especially those in the Roman world at that time – civilized people, as opposed to barbarians. Think how the meaning would change if John had written, “God so loved the oikoumene – the civilized world, the beautiful people, the cultured class, the rich and famous, and socially elite, the well positioned, the powerful and influential.” God loves those people, Christ died for the successful, but not for the marginalized, not the stranger and alien, not the powerless, the poor and uneducated, not the outsider, not the immigrant.

Another word John does not use is “ecclesia,” or “church.” He does not say “God so loved the church that he gave his only Son.” The meaning again would be drastically different if

God only loved the church – the ones who believe rightly, who are in conformity with certain doctrines and practices, who are already attempting to live in accordance with God’s will for the world. God loves these “insiders,” and Jesus’ life and death was only for them, but all the others, the practitioners of other faiths or of no faith at all, God isn’t interested in them.

But he doesn’t say “oikoumene” and he doesn’t say “ecclesia.” He says “kosmos,” which ought to make it clear to us that there is no one or no thing anywhere that is outside the realm and reach of God’s love – no person, no animal, no part of creation that is not included within the embrace of the creator. In fact, some of those people whom we might judge or condemn or dismiss as “unworthy”, are precious in God’s sight. And environmental issues which we have difficulty addressing – global warming, our drought conditions, the growing number of animal life and plant life that are becoming extinct at ever increasing rates, all these are within God’s concern. For God loves the world in all of its “worldliness”, and is doing everything possible to help the world discover this love and live in response to it in all its relationships – social, natural, spiritual. We find it difficult to grasp the implications of loving our neighbor, much less our enemy or our environment, but God’s love is capable of embracing everything – the kosmos itself.

In *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells of a personal experience that helped her to grasp the extent of God’s love. While walking on the beach with her son Sam, they saw a man not so far off from them, severely abusing his dog. Anne’s son wanted her to intervene, but she was frightened by the man’s violence. Eventually another person on the beach yelled at the man to stop, and he laughed at her while leading his poor beaten dog away.

After he was gone, Anne felt ashamed of her cowardice, but as she and Sam continued down the beach, she found herself praying one word, over and over, “Please,” she said. She didn’t know what she was asking for, but the word “ask” had special meaning for her, after an experience in church the preceding week when a member shared with the congregation how she and her husband had adopted a special needs child. They’d gone through an agency named ASK – Adopt Special Kids.

A questionnaire asked pointed questions: Could you adopt an addicted baby? A child with a terminal illness? With mild retardation? With moderate retardation? With tendencies towards violence against others? As the woman recited the list, she began to cry. And at that point, the pastor stood beside her, saying “God is an adoptive parent, too. And [God] chose us all. [God] says, “Sure, Ill take the kids who are addicted or terminal. I’ll pick all the retarded kids, and of course the sadists. The selfish one, the liars. . . .”

Recalling this event on the beach, Anne suddenly realized “That the mystery of God’s love . . . is that God loves the man who was being mean to his dog just as much as he loves babies . . . So of course, he loves ordinary old me, even or especially at my most scared and petty and mean and obsessive. Loves me, *chooses* me.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, God loves us even when we are a mess, when we are guilty of poor conduct, when we are in emotional or spiritual disarray, when we are discouraged and full of doubt; or arrogant and overly confident. In all of those places.

“Kosmos” suggests another meaning in addition to the inclusivity and love of God. It also suggests the sense of harmony and order that characterize God. We remember that the Genesis story tells us that in creation the first thing God did was to impose order on the formless, dark void that was there, which is one definition of chaos. Likewise, God’s new creation at the end of time, so we read in Revelation, will be free of suffering, pain and death – all marks of chaos, and that the “sea [will be] no more,” sea being a popular biblical metaphor for chaos.

These stories tell us that the order that God desires for God’s world is also the order that God desires for our lives. And John states that God has given us the opportunity to see perfect harmony and order in and through the life of Jesus, so that anyone who patterns his or her life

after his, will experience eternal life – a life of harmony and order, of peace and love – rather than being doomed to perish within the chaos we create through our unfaithfulness, our meanness to one another, our self-centeredness, and all of our other unholy messes.

What Martin Luther called “the gospel in Miniature,” Marcus Borg calls “the Heart of Christianity,” this love of God for the world and Jesus who is the embodiment and revelation of that love. Perhaps we could paraphrase this “gospel in miniature,” this “heart of Christianity, just for today like this:

*For God so loved the harmonious, ordered world God created and all the people in it, even when they have made a mess of things and have violated or disregarded the natural or the spiritual order of things that God has graciously provided for them, that God gave us Jesus, so that everyone, including of course, -- you and me -- and everyone else anywhere in the world who senses or suspects or recognizes in him the revelation and embodiment of God's peace, harmony and love for the world may not perish, struggle, give up, despair and die in the chaos of their own making, but may find instead abundant life, both now and ever more.<sup>2</sup>*

May it be so for you and for me as well. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, New York: Pantheon, 1999, pp. 252-255.

<sup>2</sup> Suggested in somewhat different language in “God so Googled the Cosmos,” *Homiletics*, XX,I,Jan-Feb. 2008, 66.