

SERMON: "SO"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 121
NEW TESTAMENT JOHN 3:1-17

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Second Sunday in Lent

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INTRODUCTION

I came across an e-mail from my lovely wife entitled "Nine Words Women Use"
Here are just a couple of those words and what they really mean

*Fine: This is the word women use to end an argument
when they are right and you need to stop talking*
*Nothing This is the calm before the storm. This means something,
and you should be on your toes. Arguments that begin
with "nothing" usually end in "fine".*

Little words that we often overlook have more meaning than we think
words like fine and nothing. Words like if, and, and but
and another that we'll focus on this morning – "so"
as in "**For God so loved the world**"

The basic point of this most beloved of bible verses is that it highlights
just how much God loves this world. Most translation either say
that "God so loved" or that "God loved the world so much"

Either way the question of degree is raised by the word "so"
And 'so much' is defined not just by a little two letter word
So much is defined by God's definitive action on our behalf
We are loved so much that God has acted on that love
"How much is so much?" we may ask. God answers, "Here, let me show you."

That's the first thing I want to and need to say about God's love
Pay attention to how the logic of this beloved verse flows
It begins with God's love for the world ... So loved!
Then it moves to God acting on that love.
For God so loved the world he sent his only Son to save it

Maybe you've noticed the irony in one of our more peculiar expressions,
"I just love him (or her) to death." We say it in such a way as to somehow
lessen the intensity of our feelings ... like the Midwest version of an LA air kiss
or worse, the Southern meaning of 'bless your heart.' Not a blessing!

SO WHAT?

Now think about that same phrase as it relates to this verse of Scripture
Because God loves the world, God sent Jesus to do what ... to save the world
And how exactly did Jesus do that ... by giving his life for the world God so loves
Talk about being loved to death

That is how much we are loved ... loved to death, loved so very much
And a love so great calls forth from us something more than a so – so response
A love that great really challenges us and begs the question “So, now what?”
What are we going to do when we realize just how much we are loved?

Let’s wrestle with that a bit this morning ... like a math problem
Take the given. We are loved. The whole world is
Loved so much that God showed that love in Jesus
Take that given and go with it. So, what are we going to do with it
Let’s look at what John, who penned these verses, did with that given

This most well known of all Scripture verses, John 3:16
comes to us out of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus,
a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish people, who comes to Jesus
by night with a question about God, about God’s presence

Most scholars believe that Jesus’ conversation with this religious leader
ends with verse fifteen. The well known verses that follow are John’s summary.
Doesn’t that leave you to wonder what how Nicodemus would summarize it?

We don’t hear from Nicodemus until much later in the story, in the nineteenth chapter
Not until after Jesus is crucified and then he steps forward with Joseph
of Arimathea to make arrangements for Jesus’ burial
We’re left wondering about Nicodemus ... “Did he believe?”

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is rather confrontational
Jesus gives this respected religious leader a talking to. He says ...
“Are you a teacher in Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

These beloved verses make some things clear – God’s love for the world
These verses also leave us with some questions ... how did Nicodemus respond?
And how are we to respond? Let’s keep reading, first verses 16 and 17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. 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.

NOW WHAT?

Preachers often put verses 16 and 17 together. It helps us see God's intent
- To save, not to condemn. That preaches. We need to hear that
Far too many voices out there, including preachers and pew-sitters,
that are quick to condemn. Kind of wish my mom was still around to take
that wooden spoon (the one she didn't cook with) and put it to use

Enough about that. Don't want to get caught up condemning condemners
Let's get back to talking about how to respond to that saving love ...
and keep reading the verses that follow, the ones that are part of John's
ongoing thought but don't often get included with the lectionary selection

Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

You see maybe why the lectionary passage stops at verse 17?
These verses all too easily build on a misunderstanding of verse 3:16 itself
Is it the first part ... For God so loved the world, he sent his only son
Or the next part ... that whosoever believes in him, that is most important?

Which is the foundational piece – God's action (Jesus) or our reaction (belief)
These later verses spell out how people love darkness instead of light
How people do evil in the dark so the light does not expose them

John's worldview, an ancient one still very much alive today, is that the world
is a dark place. It's a mess. We do well to escape it in the afterlife
We see this worldview in how we see the world – hell below, heaven above
and the mix of both in between, a beautiful yet brutal and broken world

The way he talks about the world lays out that view of the world quite clearly
At its best this talk of light and darkness encourages us to seek the light,
to not get caught up in this mess ... to believe. Many a sermon has made that plea
Here is what God is offering you, doing so out of great love
All you have to do is turn from the darkness to the light. Believe

SUMMARY

I appreciate the urgency and sincerity of that kind of appeal

I however, think, we are truer to the beloved verse that is John 3:16
when we focus less on what we do (or need to do) and more on what God does
The foundation of this foundational passage is "For God so loved the world"

The foundation is God's action. Our reaction is just that – a reaction

God's love made known in Jesus Christ is a given
It is not dependent on us, somehow incomplete without our signature
Yes, God's love demands a response ... but doesn't depend on it

Making God's love depend on us is just too much. Too much pressure

I don't need that kind of pressure. I try to be good. Think I've been pretty good
(for the most part) ... but having my salvation depend on me. Too much pressure

Let me try and illustrate the difference between the foundational truth of God's love
and the pressure of trying to earn God's love this way. This is Iowa
Home of the Field of Dreams. How about a catch?

You like chocolate kisses? Of course, you do. I'll give you some

Going to walk down the aisle and throw them to you.
If you catch one, great. If not, if you got hands like me
I've broken every finger (all eight, no thumbs) Guess I can't catch very well
Well, if you can't catch. Guess you missed out on the gift freely offered

God's grace made known in Jesus Christ is freely offered

It is offered even more freely than I'm tossing out candy
even more freely than the sower in the parable of the sower
who clearly did not have GPS because he scattered seed all over

God so loves us to so freely scatter ... and not just that
but to plant that seed and nurture its growth.

God's saving grace made known in Jesus Christ, the so loved in person,
is complete in and of itself. God's grace does NOT depend on
our ability to catch ... That is how loved so loved is