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Every time this Gospel comes around in the lectionary—the one that includes John 3:16, “For 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.”

I struggle with writing the sermon. I grew up with a John 3:16 worldview where believing meant eternal life and non-belief meant perishing. This one verse, despite the rest of John’s Gospel and the other Gospels that point toward what it means to follow Jesus, had the ultimate power to determine who was in and who was out of God’s kingdom. In other words, who would be saved and receive eternal life.

Today, I see things a little differently. While I believe in the power of redemption and salvation and in humanity’s need for them, I also believe that we have turned John 3:16 into a sort of idol by elevating it above the rest of the Gospel and using it too often as a tool for condemnation rather than for love.

Reading the Gospel without the lens of love is problematic. Love is here in the 3:16 verse. “For God so loved the world.” We hear it again in John 15:12, “This is my commandment. Love each other just as I have loved you.” In fact, the word “love” appears more than fifty times in John’s Gospel. Its significance cannot be underestimated and must be the lens through which we read the entire Gospel and the way we understand how God desires to be in relationship with us.

The writer that has perhaps best helped me to understand the relationship that God desires to have with humanity is William Temple, a great Anglican theologian of the twentieth century and an Archbishop of Canterbury. Temple lived through World War One and died as World War Two was raging. He understood that humanity was in trouble. He witnessed the terrible violence of these wars, the terror men were capable of inflicting upon one another, and the carnage left behind. But for Temple, it wasn't an angry God of condemnation and judgment that would turn the hearts of men and women, that would heal and bring about reconciliation. No, it was a God of grace that was needed, reaching out to humanity and seeking communion and eternal fellowship with us.

William Temple might remind us that you can't have John 3:16 without John 3:17 which says, "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." Being saved through him, implies a relationship, not simply belief.

What does it require then to be saved, to be offered eternal life, if the answer isn't simply believing? We can't answer that without first answering what it is we must be saved from. For Temple, sin is self-centeredness, a way of moving through the world without any responsibility or accountability to our neighbors, to creation, or to God. Our repentance of that self-centeredness requires us to see that we are not the centre of the world. That we cannot be the centre of the world. As Temple wrote, "I am not the centre of the world, or the standard of reference as between good and bad;

I am not, and God is. In other words, from the beginning, I put myself [wrongly] in God's place. This is my original sin."

God's response to this sin is not judgment, but forgiveness and grace and invitation. God calls us to repentance—an acknowledgement of our self-centeredness and the ways it harms ourselves and others—and then offers us a restoration to the intimacy of our relationship with God. God continues to call for our return to relationship. We are free to ignore that call, but the invitation is always there.

One of the best metaphors for the God-human relationship is played out in the Parable of the Prodigal Son because it shows the grace and love of God as parent, but also our freedom as children to deny that grace and love. The father in the parable doesn't withhold the gifts that are his to give, even though he knows the son will squander them and break his bonds with the family. And when that happens, the father doesn't seek punishment or retaliation, but only longs for his return. When the son does return, downtrodden and full of remorse, the father could have chosen to respond with anger and judgment. But he does not. He is eager to restore his son to the intimacy of the father-son relationship. (William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*)

And what is really important is that while the father's love remains steadfast while the son is away, he does not and cannot force his son's return. He must wait patiently for him to respond to that love and return home by his own free will.

William Temple used this parable to explain God's grace as dependent upon the fact of human freedom. God's grace can always be resisted. God will not resist its offering, but we always have the freedom to resist accepting it. For Temple, "[God's] grace does not compel us, it impels us; it does not push, it pulls; it does not force, it attracts." (Joseph Fletcher, *William Temple: Twentieth Century Christian*)

Temple believed that in the end, the grace of God would win its way with every human heart. This does not mean, however, that we have no role in extending that grace to others. Quite often, God's grace is offered in human relationship. We can be vehicles of that grace for others by extending the invitation. John's Gospel teaches us that as Jesus has loved us, we are now called to love one another. It is our responsibility to open the grace and love of God to others through their reflection in us.

So in light of John 3:16 and the dangers of understanding belief as the litmus test for salvation, we should remember that it is not our job to judge the world. Our spiritual lives need not center around judging others based on the criteria of their declared belief. Instead, a Christ-centered life of non-judgment might lead others to see the love and acceptance of God reflected in us. We can show others that love is the way. May it be so. Amen.