

## For God So Loved the World

Christy Stang, 7/28/19

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John 3:16 is in the Bible verse hall of fame. Some of us may have memorized this verse as children or at least heard it referred to in Christian communities countless times. It's the Twitter version of the Christian story. There are many important themes addressed in this short passage, but the aspect of today's Gospel that I want to focus on this morning is belief. The Greek word used in this passage, *pisteuon*, does mean to believe in, but it has other layers as well. It can mean to trust someone, to commit yourself to something, or it can even have the connotation of being obedient to someone. When we say we believe in the good news of Jesus Christ, we are saying that we have chosen to commit ourselves to this particular story of salvation, to this story of deep love. To say that we believe in God doesn't at its core mean that we are familiar with or understand every part of the creeds or every part of the Bible, but that we acknowledge the presence of divine love in the world. Believing in God does not depend on the details of how we understand the world, but it does depend on acknowledging and accepting God's love.

When you accept a gift, you usually take it in your hands. You connect with it, even before you know what it is. You don't have to understand everything about it to know that it's yours. I used to sing in the Trinity Choir, and every winter, the choir members meet for a party. The party includes food and fellowship, but the most unique part of the gathering is the gift exchange game. Each person brings a usually quirky white elephant gift, and all the gifts are placed in the middle of the room. Dice are passed around the room, and each time someone rolls doubles, they get to choose a present from the middle of the room without opening it yet. The first round lasts until the gifts have all been chosen, and then we go around the room and all the gifts are unwrapped. Some of the gifts I've seen have been rather strange, including a giant eggplant centerpiece, a small ceramic potato with legs that you could put on a shelf, and a Christmas tree lampstand, overloaded with painted ornaments and featuring a small children's choir gathered around the tree. No lampshade, no lightbulb. Next begins the round in which people can steal the gifts from other players when they roll doubles. This part of the game is quite intense and involves a lot of running across the room. There are always a couple of gifts that everyone is fighting over, usually a bottle of wine or a box of chocolate. The catch, however, is that at the end of the game, you must take home everything in your gift pile, including whatever strange gifts you may have opened at the beginning that no one stole from you. This is how I ended up taking the Christmas tree lampstand home with me. I didn't have to completely understand why someone had made a lampstand like that or understand how I would use it in my own home to know that it was mine. God's love is far more appealing than a Christmas tree lampstand without a lampshade or a lightbulb, but similarly, we only need to know that God's love is meant for us to be able to fully accept it and believe in God's power. The only prerequisite for accepting God's love and thus salvation through Jesus Christ is our existence.

We come as we are, and if we accept that God's love is boundless and reaches us wherever we are, our hearts will be opened to receive it.

When we actually pull off the wrapping paper on the present of God's love, what are we looking at? What is God's love and what exactly are we accepting? 1st John 4:8 tells us that "God is love." The presence of God working in the world is equal to love, and Jesus dying to save us from our sins is the embodiment of love. God would rather die and give up everything than be without us. The ultimate sacrifice represents ultimate love, and to truly accept God's love means that we love God back. In his book *Wishful Thinking*, theologian Frederick Buechner explains that "to love God is to be saved" (103). God's love is like a magnet, and our love for God follows from God's love for us. Whenever humanity expresses love, we are expressing the presence of God.

I know I just talked about Italy a couple weeks ago in my last sermon, but I have another story about receiving that I just have to share with you all. During my time studying abroad, my program scheduled a couple short trips for the students, and in one of them, we stayed overnight at a monastery in Camprena, which is in Tuscany. All twenty of us sat at a giant table in their dining hall and ate whatever they put in front of us. One of the dishes they offered to us appeared to be a salad with cubes of bread in it which were bigger and softer than croutons. None of us knew exactly what it was or what it would taste like, but we knew that it could be ours if we said, "yes." Later when one of my very extroverted friends asked the waiter what it was, after already calling them over once to ask what it was called, we all learned that it was a chopped salad called *panzanella* made with soaked stale bread, onions, tomatoes, basil, and cucumber, topped with a dressing of olive oil and vinegar. There were about 4 or 5 of us sharing the dishes on that end of the table, and together we ate three gigantic platters of *panzanella*. It was the most delicious salad I've ever eaten, and it had all of us giggling and exclaiming about it. The other students kept looking skeptically at our end of the table, wondering what had us so overjoyed. That dinner when we all ate *panzanella* together became an inside joke for the rest of the trip, and we referred to it many times because all of us were so delighted with it. When we were first introduced to *panzanella*, we didn't have to know and understand the ingredients to accept it. We just had to sit there and allow the dish to be placed in front of us, and we knew that there would always be more if we asked.

God's love doesn't require that we understand it. We don't have to be able to parse out exactly why or how Jesus died to save us. Humanity can never fully understand God's love. We can attempt to figure out how it works and why we have been given such an incredible gift, but the only thing required of us is to acknowledge God. Taking a cue from the '80s song "The Power of Love," we "don't need no credit card to ride this train." Believe in the power of love, in the all-encompassing presence of God, and it is ours. No questions asked. Like the never-ending *panzanella* at the monastery, God's love is limitless and can be unknown at first. It can bring us joy and draw people together. We just have to acknowledge the story and accept what it means, that God's love is an overwhelming presence in the world meant for us. Frederick Buechner writes about love that "it is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent" (*Wishful Thinking*, 65). All we have to do is say yes to God's love, even though we may not understand it. The poetry by Lao-Tzu in the Tao Te Ching tells us that "the greatest things in the world /

Must be accomplished through the smallest” (Lao-Tzu, 63). Our consent is the small piece that leads us to overwhelming abundance. We know that God’s love is ours. All we have to do is accept it.

Accepting God’s love does not happen in a single moment. We must continue to open our hearts to God and accept God’s love into our lives over and over again, similar to the way in which my friends and I accepted the platters of *panzanella* over and over again. Psalm 46:10 comes to mind for me when I think about how to accept God’s love. “Be still and know that I am God.” Be still and know that the Christmas tree lampstand or the *panzanella* salad are meant for you. Be still and know that God’s love is ours if only we say yes and accept it.