

A MEASURELESS LOVE

JOHN 3:16

Do you have a favorite verse in the Bible? John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, often said his favorite verse was Zechariah 3:2, "...Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" Unusual choice! David Livingstone, the first missionary to the continent of Africa, preferred the last words of Matthew 28:20 where Jesus says, "...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." John Newton, the man who wrote *Amazing Grace*, claimed his favorite Bible verse was Romans 5:20, "...But where sin increased, grace increased all the more." Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, chose Romans 1:17 as his life verse, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'the righteous will live by faith.'" I'm not sure I have one favorite Bible verse, but Jeremiah 29:11 is one of them, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" I love that verse!

I would guess, however, that the favorite verse of the majority of Christians the world over would be John 3:16. I'd like you to read or recite that verse with me in unison just now: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (NIV) During the Advent season, I want to take a careful look at this one Bible verse with you. We could easily call it "The Christmas Verse." Its theme is the theme of Christmas. Its message is the message of Christmas. Its impact is the impact of Christmas. This morning I want you to consider with me just the first phrase of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..." That's all about a measureless love.

"For God so loved the world..." Have you ever seen a small child reach out and try to grab a star in the night sky? I feel a lot like that child whenever I begin talking about the love of God. It's as impossible to explain God's love fully as it is for a child to grab a star with his or her hand. And yet when you reach out towards a star, you – at least – call attention to it. As we stretch our hearts and minds towards God's love this morning, hopefully something of the greatness, the power and the reality of that love will be experienced. First of all, then, God's measureless love is...

AS BIG AS GOD HIMSELF.

Plainly and simply, the Bible says, "...God is love." (1 John 4:8 NLT) Does that mean that God and love are somehow identical or the same thing? No! you can't worship love and call it God. But that statement underlines the fact that God interacts with you, me and everyone in a way that is always and forever loving. A.W. Tozer, a Christian author, wrote, "It is a strange and beautiful eccentricity of the free God that He has allowed His heart to be emotionally identified with us. Self-sufficient as He is, He wants our love and will not be satisfied until He gets it. Free as He is, He has let our heart be bound to us

forever.” Love is what permeates and fills everything about God. Is God eternal? Then, His love is eternal. Is God infinite? Then, His love is infinite. Is God holy? Then, His love is holy. Is God patient and forgiving? Then, His love is patient and forgiving. God’s love is as vast and measureless as God Himself. God’s love is as big as God Himself.

What does John 3:16 tells us about God’s love? The Greek word for love here is *agapao*. Many of you might be familiar with the noun form of that word – *agape*. You may have heard messages or read books about *agape* love. But look with me a little closer at this word for love. First of all, *agapao* is in what’s called the active voice which means the subject is producing the action. One of the greatest truths about God’s love is that it comes to you even though you are not attractive to God. It’s not that you repulse God physically. Your repulse Him morally. The problem is your inner character not your outer body. All of us are sinners and sin makes us morally ugly to God. The fact is He finds us offensive.

The Bible also tells us that nobody reaches out to God first. No one wants to have a whole lot to do with God unless you run into a problem you can’t handle on your own. God’s love had to take the initiative. His love reached out to you despite the fact there was nothing spiritually or morally attractive to Him about you. Love can be an emotion, but genuine love is always more than a feeling. God’s love is a decision. God decided to love you despite His feelings about you. God has some very strong feelings about sin and its presence in your life. It’s beyond your ability to grasp how much God hates sin. But despite those feelings, God decided to act in love towards you. Augustine, the great theologian, put it like this, “God knew how to hate in each one of us what we had made and to love what He had made.”

Here’s a second important fact about love from John 3:16. *Agapao* is here in what’s called the aorist tense which is one of several past tenses in the Greek language. It implies that God’s love has already been demonstrated. That doesn’t mean God has stopped loving you today or will do so in the future. No, it simply means that God demonstrated His great love for you in the past in a definite event – namely the coming of Jesus: His birth, His life, His teaching, His miracles, His death and His resurrection. Christmas is an opportunity to celebrate the fact that the Son of God allowed Himself to be somehow limited to the womb of an ordinary, virgin woman named Mary. He came into the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That Jesus died on a cross for your sins and rose again from the dead three days later to make it possible for you to have an eternal relationship with God. God was loving you in all of that. Christmas is the story of how God sent Himself to bring salvation to you, me and everyone. God’s love is best seen in the whole story and life of Jesus.

Third, *agapao* is in what’s called the indicative mood which conveys certainty in the Greek language. This is rock solid, never leave you or forsake you, “you can count on it” love. I can’t think of anything more wonderful to me personally about

God's love than to be reminded that it's unchangeable, it's certain, and it's definite. That's what keeps you and me coming back to God over and over again. Nothing you have done or ever will do can change the fact of God's love for you. Fixed. Certain. Unchanging. Unchangeable. That's God's love!

Some years ago now, a college student was living in a boarding house. Downstairs on the first floor was an elderly, retired music teacher, who was now infirm and unable to leave his apartment. Every morning that student and music teacher participated in a little ritual together. The student would come down the steps, open the old man's door and ask, "Well, what's the good news?" The old man – this retired music teacher – would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of the wheelchair and say, "That's middle C. It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. That tenor who lives upstairs sings flat. That piano down the hall is out of tune, but, my young friend, *that* is middle C!" The old man had discovered one thing upon which he could depend; one constant, unchanging reality in his life; one still point in a turning world. For every follower of Jesus, that one thing is the love of God. God's measureless love is as big as God Himself. It is, secondly...

AS WIDE AS THE WORLD ITSELF.

"For God so loved the world." The word for "world" here and throughout the New Testament is *kosmos*. It's a part of our own language – "cosmos" is another word for the universe and "cosmological" means the study of the universe. It could mean that in the Greek language as well. But more often than not in the Bible, whenever you read the word "world" it isn't in reference to the universe or Planet Earth. Instead, *kosmos* refers to everything that is hostile to God and is in rebellion against Him – sinful people, sinful attitudes, sinful acts, sinful lifestyles. *Kosmos* is opposed to God and needs to be transformed.

Now, this is truly marvelous! God loves those who are His enemies... those who first hated Him... those who at first wanted nothing to do with Him... those who spat in His face... those who ripped His back to shreds with whips... those who nailed Him to the cross... those who watched Him die. Every last person who has lived, is living or will ever live stands before that cross in a spiritual sense. Before any person becomes a follower of Jesus, he or she is part of this hostile reality called the world – *kosmos*. And yet we're told that God loves this world. In addition to John 3:16, we read, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8 NLT)

Is that a contradiction? God loves the world, but we're actually warned not to love the world. The Bible also says, "Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father." (1 John 2:15 MSG) It also says, "...Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God." (James 4:4 NLT) In other words, there are anti-God

attitudes, lifestyles and behaviors that you are supposed to avoid. But here's the irony of it. Over here and over there... next door to you and on the other side of the planet... in the city and out in the country... in a suburban American home and an African hut... God's love is received by people in the world. And when that happens, people who've been twisted, broken, messed up and beaten down by sinful attitudes and behavior come out of *kosmos* and being to live for and live unto Jesus as the Savior and Lord of all. When the world is penetrated and infiltrated by the love of God, it stops being the world. It's transformed!

You might say, "Rick, there's no way I can love the whole world." Nobody is asking you to love the world! Aren't you relieved? Only God's love is big, wide and powerful enough to encompass the whole world. But here's what happens when God's big love gets inside of you. You are enabled and empowered to love people you would not otherwise be able to love. God's love does some strange and wonderful things in the lives of those who are stretched by its bigness. Have you ever been dumb enough to pray for patience? Big mistake! God then exposes you to all these exasperating, frustrating people and situations. Why? That's how you develop patience. That's how God does it. He puts you into situations or with people who are sure to make you impatient at first.

The same thing happens when it comes to love. In order to develop love as a character quality, God will deliberately send folk into your life who will frustrate you, disappoint you, fail you and generally rub you the wrong way. So, don't pray to become more loving! Seriously, however, God will push you in this area whether you pray for it or not. Why? The Bible teaches that learning to love like God loves is the primary mission in life for any and every follower of Jesus. It then becomes the primary mission of the place where all these followers of Jesus hang out: the local church. What should Karl Road Baptist Church be known for? God's love permeating the place as it flows through its members and friends. Love being freely offered and received. Loving people the way they are and trusting Jesus to do the necessary transformation by His grace and in His time. Isn't right doctrine important? Of course! Aren't vital kids and youth programs important? Sure are! Isn't reaching lost people in the community and being missional important? Certainly! But everything pales in significance to Jesus' simple and central command to His followers, "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other." (John 13:34-35 MSG)

Vince Lombardi, the legendary football coach, was asked what it took to make a winning team. He said, "There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don't win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient: if you're going to play together as a team, you've got to care for one another. You've got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself: 'If I don't block that man, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that

he can do his.’ The difference between mediocrity and greatness is the feeling these guys have for one another.” Now Vince Lombardi was talking about a football team, for crying out loud! If that principle is true for a football team, how much more is it true for members of God’s team – the church of Jesus Christ! How true it ought to be of Karl Road Baptist Church!

No, it’s true, you can’t love the whole world. Only God can do that. But you can love a few people in this world. Maybe it’s a difficult person at work or at your school. Maybe it’s a wounded person here at the church. Maybe it’s a searching person who lives in your neighborhood or works at a restaurant you eat at regularly. Maybe it’s a member of your family with whom you just clash. God will give you the ability to love people you could not love and would not love in your strength. When God’s wide love gets inside of you, well, you can’t help but get wider, too! God’s measureless love - it’s as big as God Himself. It’s as wide as the world itself. But, here’s one more thought. It’s, also, ...

AS LITTLE AS YOU YOURSELF.

Augustine, that great church leader I quoted earlier, also said this, “God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love.” Yes, God’s love is so great, so immense, so infinite and so eternal that it’s beyond your comprehension. But God’s love is also personal, intimate and individual. God doesn’t just love vast populations in a sort of sweeping, general way. He loves people. God doesn’t just love masses. He loves persons – each one of us, every one of us, all of us. God’s love – as big, boundless and measureless as it is – is also small enough, intimate enough and personal enough to get focused on just you or just me.

What kind of love is this? It’s a love that you have been created for and for which you crave. And only God can give it. For me, it’s best expressed, defined and explained by the Bible itself. When you feel unloved, terribly alone, hopelessly little or just overwhelmed by your own seeming insignificance in this great big world, you need to read Romans 8:35-39 (NLT). “Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love?...”, v. 35 asks. Human love can be very uncertain. Loved ones die. Marriages dissolve. Friends fail us or we fail them. But nothing can ever separate you from God’s love. No one can take it away. Nothing can destroy it. “...Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?”, v. 35 continues. No is the only answer. None of those experiences are evidence that God has somehow stopped loving you. Not an ungodly world. Not disappointment. Not suffering. Not my own sin. Nothing? Nothing!

Look at v. 37 with me now, “No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.” God’s love gives you the energy to overcome, to endure and to conquer. What does the next verse say? “And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life,....” Nothing in life can separate you from God’s love and now He has

transformed death into this doorway into His eternal presence. "...neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow...." Nothing about yesterday, today or tomorrow can change one fact, one dimension or one reality about God's love. "...neither angels nor demons... not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love." We live in a scary world full of evil powers beyond imagination, but they do not phase or affect God's love for you in the least. V. 39 concludes, "No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." God's measureless love is as little as you yourself.

Being from the South, David Slagle loves ribs. Hearing about a particular restaurant that had amazing ribs, David and a bunch of his friends drove almost an hour to get there. The place was packed, and the food was great. It was "all you can eat rib night." Eating ribs is a messy business. Barbecue sauce gets on your face, fingers, and clothes; dirty napkins pile up next to half-eaten bowls of baked beans and cole slaw. When David and his friends had eaten all they could eat, they paid their bill and waddled out to the car.

That's when David reached into his pocket for his car keys and came up with nothing but lint. Starting to panic, he looked through the window at the ignition. No luck. When David saw that the ignition was empty, he knew exactly where his keys were—the keys to his car, his house, and his office. Only seconds earlier, those precious keys had slid right off his tray, following a half-eaten corn cob and several bones to the bottom of a trash can. He had thrown away his keys on "all you can eat rib night." It was a long walk home, and David's friends certainly weren't going to do his dirty work for him. So David dove into the dumpster behind the restaurant. He fished through bones, beans, barbecue, corn, cole slaw, and a host of saliva-soaked napkins. A shiny layer of trashcan slime had coated his arms before he finally grasped hold of those precious keys.

The Incarnation – the whole Christmas thing - is the story about our dumpster-diving God. I mean no disrespect by calling Him that. In fact, that image - as repulsive as it might be to us - doesn't begin to describe what God really did. On the contrary, we should have a soaring adoration for the infinite God who left a perfect heaven to search through the moral garbage and filth of this fallen world for something precious to Him. You. Me. Every person, any person who will open his or her heart to the measureless love of God.

"For God so loved the world." Christmas is the time to remember that God's measureless love is as big as God Himself, as wide as the world itself and as little as you yourself.