

“LONG WALK IS PART OF GIFT”

John 3:14-17

I enjoy vanity license plates. In fact, we have one on each of our three vehicles. I find it an interesting challenge to try to decipher the message on some license plates. For instance, a few years ago I was waiting at a stop light and noticed the license on the car in front of me which read (remember, in capital letters) **III XVI**. Do you get the message here—III XVI? I finally figured out these letters were actually Roman numerals, a 3 and a 16. Yes, the owner of the vehicle was a Christian who was expressing his or her faith by reminding us of John 3:16. Less subtle are persons who sit in the end zone at a football game and hold up a sign reading “*John 3:16*,” doing so especially when a field goal or point after touchdown kick is being tried and the eyes of everyone in the stadium, as well as the television cameras, are focused that direction. Along with the 23rd Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer, John 3:16 is one of the most familiar scriptures in the Bible. This verse may well have been one of the first you and I committed to memory. “*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.*” (NRSV) Martin Luther called this one verse “*the gospel in a nutshell.*”

William Willimon, former dean of the chapel at Duke University, tells of one day driving on a narrow, winding road in the mountains of western North Carolina when he came upon a sign crudely painted on a rock in large white letters: “*PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD – READ JOHN 3:16*”. We probably have all seen such signs on fence posts, the side of barns, billboards and church signs. Willimon comments that he is grateful he already knew John 3:16 so he did not have to go madly thumbing through his Bible looking for it when he should have his eyes on that narrow mountain road. As he drives on, Willimon notes that he soon comes to a hairpin curve with a steep cliff off the edge of the road where his tire could have blown out or his brakes failed or he could have come upon a large boulder in the roadway. Any of these circumstances would have put him in a dangerous situation. Yes, Willimon could have come face to face with God. The question is, was he prepared for that?

I enjoy the story of the two old men who, thinking they are doing their civic duty, stand along the side of the road with homemade signs which read, *“The end is near. Change your way.”* Some drivers, believing these two old men are religious fanatics expressing their apocalyptic faith, speed up as they pass. Soon the old men hear the screeching of tires and the sound of a crash. After this happens several times, one of the men says to the other, *“Maybe we should change our signs which read, ‘The end is near. Change your way,’ to instead read, ‘Bridge out. Turn around.’”*

So, what is your image of the God we shall face on our day of judgment? Do you primarily envision God as a judge or a savior? Will condemnation or grace be God’s attitude? Thomas Long, Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, tells of a veteran minister who, in examining ministerial candidates during the ordination process, would ask each candidate to look out the window at persons walking by the building. The veteran minister would ask the candidate to let him know when a person has been spotted whom the candidate does not know personally. The inquirer then would ask the young candidate to describe the stranger theologically. This is not a request to describe the passer-by’s physical characteristics or how they are dressed, but what is the candidate’s understanding of the stranger’s relationship to God. In other words, what is the candidate’s understanding of our human nature? Having received the candidate’s answer, the veteran minister would indicate that answers to his question generally fall into two groups. Some would say, *“The person is a sinner in need of Jesus’ salvation,”* while others would answer, *“The person, whether he or she knows it or not, is a child of God, loved and accepted by the grace of God.”* Which of these two answers most closely reflects your understanding of our human nature—that we are basically evil or that we are inherently good? The veteran minister would then note to the candidate that while both answers are theologically correct, he has found those who give the second answer—that *we are primarily children of God who are accepted by God’s grace*—make better pastors.

We need to acknowledge that sin is basic to our human nature. We deeply disappoint God with our decisions and how we treat others. The question is, *how does God respond to us?* We may identify with Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, who said, *“If I was God and the world had treated me like it has treated God, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces.”* Such a

response of judgment and condemnation would be understandable—and maybe even justified. Yet the scripture we just heard—John 3:16 and 17—gives us a different answer. It portrays a God, who instead of striking out in rage, responds with love which is defined in terms of sacrificial giving. John 3:16 suggests God cares for us enough to give the life of his only Son. This message is then reinforced in the next verse, verse 17, which reminds us that *“God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order to save it.”*

Understanding that John 3:16 is many Christian’s favorite Bible verse—many even suggest it summarizes the gospel in one sentence—I was surprised in reading a sermon preached by Dr. David Lose, pastor of Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, when he says that he does not care much for this verse, in fact sometimes he does not like it at all. (Day 1, March 18, 2012) Dr. Lose goes on to explain that he is troubled by the implications of what it means to receive love so great that another person has given his or her life for me. Receiving such unconditional love is not always easy or comfortable.

Dr. Lose recounts the story of a friend whose six year old son one evening protests having to go to bed. Finally in frustration over the father’s insistence that he go to bed, the son blurts out, *“Daddy, I hate you!”* The father keeps his cool and replies, *“Ben, I am sorry you feel that way, but I love you.”* Interestingly, Ben does not retreat to apologize for his strong words or affirm that he really does love his father, but instead yells back, *“Daddy, don’t say you love me!”* The father continues, *“But, Ben, it’s true. I do love you.”* Ben keeps demanding, *“Don’t say you love me anymore, Daddy.”* To which the father always replies, *“But, Ben, I do love you.”* This exchange is repeated several times. Finally, the father takes his son’s face into his hands and holds it so Ben has to look his father in the eye and says, *“Ben, now listen to me. I love you whether you like it or not.”*

Dr. Lose notes that even at the age of six, Ben realizes that unconditional love is difficult to accept. This is a different dynamic than the father negotiating with his son, *“I’ll love you if you will go to bed nicely.”* Then, being a player in this scenario, Ben has some power. He could say, *“OK, I’ll go to bed tonight, but I am not going to eat my vegetables tomorrow.”* Once the father refuses to negotiate by making his love conditioned on something Ben does, Ben can do nothing but accept or flee that love. That is true for us also regarding our relationship with God.

If God's love for us is conditioned on our actions, then we have power. We can negotiate. But when God loves us completely and unconditionally—when God sacrifices the life of his son for us—then there is nothing we can do to change the fact that God loves us no matter what we do.

Norman Vincent Peale was pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City for 52 years and a proponent of the *“power of positive thinking.”* He and his wife, Ruth, would divide their Christmases among their three grown children and their families. This required extensive travel and meant a hectic schedule. Ruth Peale at times would question whether it was worth all the effort. When she would express frustration, Norman would give her a wink and say, *“Long walk, Ruth, long walk.”* Ruth would then laugh and get on with the preparations. *“Long walk”* had become a code phrase for the Peales. It had begun years before after they read a story about an African boy who had given his missionary teacher a seashell as a Christmas gift. The boy had walked for miles to a special bay which was the only place such shells could be found. Knowing this, the teacher commented that the boy must have traveled a long way to get this present. The boy's eyes shone as he replied, *“Long walk part of gift.”* You see, while the shell was pretty, it was not valuable, and the boy knew that. What made the gift special was the effort which had gone into getting the shell. The long walk was part of the gift. In fact, the long walk was the most costly part of the gift. Making the effort to travel long distances to their children's homes was part of the Peale's Christmas gift to them.

The scripture reminds us, *“God did not send his son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. God loved the world so much that he gave the life of his son, so that those who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.”* Whether we like it or not, God's love for us is unconditional. A crucial part of that gift is what it cost God—literally, the long walk made by his son, Jesus, to the cross where he sacrificed his life. **Jesus did not come to condemn us, but out of love gave the life of his son on the cross to save us.**

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