

The God-ness of God

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 10, 2024

Friendship Presbyterian Church

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. 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.

(John 3:16-17, NRSV)

You see it just about every time you tune in to a football game: Someone, usually in the end zone seats, holding up a sign that says “John 3:16.” Sometimes, they wear a multi-colored clown wig to stand out even more and make themselves more likely to get noticed! There have been many jokes about this over the years, and I’ve laughed, but I won’t add to them today.

I suppose there are many messages that folks might pick up from such a sign: that the weirdo with a clown wig is a Christian, or that people should go to church, or simply that they should spare a thought for God sometime. All of these and more are perfectly valid takeaways. But I wonder how many *do* go back and actually re-read that verse – it’s one of those that even non-Christians can quote at least in part, and most Christians would see as a familiar nutshell expression of the gospel. But here’s the thing – the very fact that we think we already know what it says, honestly makes it hard to hear afresh.

Maybe *that* explains why these sign-holders *do* wear those nutty wigs – to put the verse before eyes which have seen the reference thousands of times, but then also inspire some to take a deeper look and maybe even let it into the heart. I’ll say that the message of John 3:16, if one really *lets* it sink in, does its own work of making itself stand out – and I believe that message has a lot to do what we believe, as followers of Jesus, makes God ... *God*.

What do *you* think about when you think of God? I was leading Preschool chapel recently and asked that question, “What makes God *God*? How is *God* so different from anything or anyone else?” How would *you* go about explaining that to someone?

I suppose the most obvious answer is that *God* is invisible ... but not like an imaginary friend is invisible, but *real*, and not only real, but utterly *unique* and *holy*, and in ways beyond words and comprehension, *majestic* and *glorious*. And with that majesty and glory and greatness, comes God’s *power*. Anyone who bothers with believing in God believes that God, in some manner or other, created the world, and by any measure, *that’s* pretty powerful! And then there are all the amazing stories in the Bible of God’s mighty deeds and works over the ages – all of which, together, point to one who is beyond all comparison, truly worthy of being called *God*.

These are the sorts of qualities that human beings have always ascribed to the truly divine, whether in the form of many gods, or one God, and for us, these qualities then rightly evoke awe and reverence and worship. “Our God,” as the popular praise song puts it, “is an AWESOME

God!” We might say, then, that this *is* the “God-ness” of God ... God’s incomparability, God’s majesty and glory, God’s power, God’s sheer greatness.

All of these grand qualities are consistent with the Bible’s witness, and so I won’t contradict it. But there’s so much *more* too – and I think the guy in the clown wig offers us the clue ... John 3:16 offers us the clue:

For God so *loved* the world that he *gave* his *only Son* ...

I think it’s our human nature to expect the “God-ness” of God to consist in things like majesty and glory ... power ... greatness. These things, after all, are what we might assume to be most worthy of worship about God. And yet here in John, the gospel tells us something crucial about who and what God is, and what God is not.

Whatever else may be true about divine power or glory, John looks beyond these natural superlatives to lift up something else. If we would truly see and know who God is, then we would look deep into the fire of a great mystery and see God’s *Love* for the world. Look anywhere else, and we would miss it all.

John uses an uncommon Greek word for this to make clearer what he means: *Agapē* – a self-giving, self-sacrificing, unconditional Love:

A Love that chooses us before we choose it ...

A Love that pours itself out without expectation of repayment ...

A Love that perseveres even in the face of rejection ...

Such Love is rare, but when it is experienced, it is unforgettable. In diverse places and ways, in manners unheralded, it quietly graces life with beauty and transforms it, and heals it, and sets it free. John did not reach this insight about God by rationalizing, or speculating, or intuiting on the nature of Divinity. He did not reach it by projecting his natural desires or expectations on to the Heavens. He reached it because he and his fellow disciples *experienced* the life of *Jesus*. In Jesus, the gospel tells us, God so *loves* the world and *gives* all to the world.

This good news of who and what God is, what makes God *God*, changes everything – not just about how we see God, but how we see *life* and this *world* in this re-orienting, values-shifting light.

I saw something on Facebook this past week that I think really drives this point home. If you want, take out your bulletin or some scratch paper and something to write with. Or if you’d rather, just ponder the questions I’ll ask in the silence of your own heart. Just consider each for a moment, and as I go on, I think you’ll get the point:

- Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
- Name the last five Heisman trophy winners.

- Name ten people who have won a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.
- Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and actress.
- Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.

How did you do?

The point is, none of us remember the headliners of yesterday. But these headliners of yesterday are no second-rate achievers! They are the best in their fields. But the applause eventually dies ... awards tarnish ... achievements are forgotten ... accolades and certificates are buried with their owners.

Now, here's another quiz. See how you do on this one:

- List a few teachers who helped your journey through school.
- Name three friends who have sat with you through a difficult time.
- Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile.
- Think of a few people who have made you feel valued and appreciated and special.

Easier? So what does all this mean? This: that the people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are simply the ones who care the most. They are the ones who *love* and *give*.

This is what John knew too when telling the story of Jesus and who Jesus is, and in this story, models the *kind* of God God is – that for all the power and the glory, the “high-aboveness” and “far-offness” of God ... the “God-ness” of God is God’s Love, God’s Giving, even God’s Humility!

Twenty centuries later, the great theologian Karl Barth could thus write that, in Jesus Christ, we have a completely different kind of Divinity than the human heart could ever have conceived. In Christ’s life and example, he said,

God’s deity is thus no prison in which God can exist only in and for Himself. It is rather God’s freedom to be in and for Himself but also with and for us, to assert but also to sacrifice Himself, to be wholly exalted but also completely humble, not only almighty but also almighty mercy, not only Lord but also servant, not only judge but also Himself the judged, not only [our] eternal king but also [our] brother in time. And all that without in the slightest forfeiting God’s deity! All that, rather, being the highest proof and proclamation of God’s deity! The One who does and manifestly can do all that, that One and no other is the living God.

This is the gospel we would proclaim and live out today ... that the majesty and glory of God is the majesty and glory of God’s Love – to the Glory of God! Amen.