

For God So Loved the World

B Lent 4--John 3:14-21

I've been waiting for the liturgically correct moment to do this. (*Holds up a sign with "John 3:16" handwritten on it.*) That's today's gospel passage, and judging from where you most often see it referenced, you might think it says, "For God so loved football that he gave his only quarterback, so that everyone who receives his passes may not be defeated but may win the eternal Superbowl." You know, metaphorically speaking, that's not too far off. Maybe I should come out with a new translation: *The Bible for Sports Fans*. But of course, as we know from today's reading, John 3:16 actually says: "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."

It's a top-drawer quote, a standard bearer for the faith, you might say. And yet (and this might shock you) despite its persistent marketing by Christians at nationally televised sporting events, our religion, and religion in general, is still losing ground in America. According to a recent Trinity College poll, the number of adults who claim no religious affiliation is up to 15% of the population.ⁱ That's almost double what it was in 1990, and most of that increase is among twenty-one to forty-five-year-olds. So despite the valiant efforts of Christian sports fans to get John 3:16 onto TV screens across the country, whatever the church has to say is losing the attention of the culture at large.

Despite, or maybe *because of*.

You know, I haven't been a Christian all that long, and I feel like I can still channel the self I was before my baptism in 2001--the skeptical, spiritual-but-not-

religious self with the finely-tuned nonsense meter. In fact, in many ways, I still *am* that self. And that self, which still sees the church through the eyes of an outsider, has a real problem with what John 3:16 seems to be saying. God loved the world. Fine. But so much that God gave God's only Son up to be gruesomely murdered for that world? What kind of God would do that? What kind of God would set up the rules so that God must practice child sacrifice for the sake of the rest of our souls? I mean, if this is a loving God, I'm not feeling it. To me, this kind of atonement theology, this need for payment in blood by a sacrificial victim, just seems sort of barbaric.

Now if this works for your theology, I'm not here to mess with that. We can agree to disagree. But for those of you who share my discomfort with this notion, maybe there's another way to understand this text. Consider, for example, this story: September 11, 2001, New York City. People are flooding down the stairwells of the twin towers to escape those burning buildings. On their way down they pass a grim, determined group of men climbing the stairs, heading ninety flights up into the fiery chaos from which everyone else is fleeing. Fire-fighters. It's so amazing that at one point, a group of office workers break into spontaneous applause at the sight of these guys. Three-hundred forty three firefighters died in that catastrophe. The second greatest single loss in the history of the department was a loss of 12 in 1966.ⁱⁱ So now, here's the question: did they climb those stairs intending to die *or did they climb hoping that they could save lives, and knowing that they might die?*

Now let's imagine, for a moment, a family member, a spouse let's say, of one of the firefighters who *lived*. How vulnerable must she feel, after 9-11, kissing her husband and sending him out the door to report to the fire station day after day? How many times

must she will her fingers to let go of his sleeve? How many times must she force a smile and control her parting remark, "See you tomorrow," to sound casual, cheerful even, like a statement and not like a plea?

And yet many of those surviving firefighters have not changed their jobs. Their wives and partners continue to send them out each day, releasing them to the dangers of their calling, as do the spouses of police officers and soldiers and in some parts of the world journalists, politicians, and activists. Now I'm sure that these folks love their heroic family members as much as anyone loves their family members. But they also love the world enough, they love the greater human community enough, to release those family members into that world. They are not looking to sacrifice their loved ones. They are hoping, rather, that through those loved ones, lives will be saved, and the world will become a better place.

Maybe that's how God loves the world. Maybe God gave Jesus not *for the sake* of his death, but rather *in the hope* that his life would change other people's lives. Maybe God sent Jesus into the world knowing that he might be killed, even that he probably would be killed, and prepared to respond to that death with the power of resurrection, but still in some way hoping against hope that humankind would respond to Jesus' message and presence in more life-affirming ways.

Biblical scholar Sarah Henrich points out that *houtos*, the Greek word for "so" in the phrase "God so loved the world," does not mean "so much" but rather "just so," or "in this way."ⁱⁱⁱ God loved the world not *so much* that God gave God's Son, but *in this way*: that God gave God's son. In other words, God loved the world in the way that a spouse of a firefighter, or police officer, or a journalist loves the world--releasing this loved-one

into that world to help transform it. The gift of God's Son to us, from this point of view, becomes not so much a gift of atonement but a gift of hope. It is a gift of God's most precious self to the world God yearns and seeks to heal. This understanding is, in fact, supported by the verse that comes immediately afterwards, John 3:17, which may be the verse that we ought to be displaying in stadiums around the country. It 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."

ⁱ These statistics are taken from the article "God Will Provide--Unless the Government Gets There First" in *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed on March 20, 2009 at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123690880933515111.html>.

ⁱⁱ This story accessed on March 21, 2009 at <http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/091101rescuers.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Henrich's commentary on John 14-21 was accessed on March 20, 2009 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx#>.