

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Scott Kenefake, Interim Senior Pastor
“To Believe is to Belove”
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21
4th Sunday in Lent
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When Billy Graham died February 21 at age 99 in Montreat, the Christian world lost one of its most influential voices. Born on a farm near Charlotte, Graham spent the early years of his ministry mainly as an itinerant Youth for Christ speaker in the Midwest. But highly publicized crusades in Los Angeles in 1949 and in New York in 1957 hurled him into the national and international spotlights. He held that iconic position for the rest of the century and beyond.

Graham’s achievements piled up like snowdrifts. Most notably, nearly 215 million people around the world heard him preach in person, a figure possibly exceeded only by John Paul II. He scored a spot on Gallup’s list of Ten Most Admired Men in the World 59 times, nearly twice as many as his closest rival, Ronald Reagan.

Graham, I think, left two main legacies for the Protestant mainline. *First*, he displayed a steady though sometimes uneven march from a conservative to a progressive position on most of the key social issues of the day (excluding women’s rights). For instance, he gradually moved from support for racial segregation to opposition to it to calling racism a sin and admonishing whites to obey civil rights laws. Originally the fiercest of hawks about communism and indecisive about the Vietnam War, he grew to champion nuclear disarmament.

Graham’s *second* legacy to mainline Protestantism lay in what might be called evangelical ecumenism. As the years passed, fewer and fewer doctrinal particularities served as deal breakers for him. This posture pivoted on his willingness to work with almost anyone who would work with him as long as they did not ask him to change his message. He labored tirelessly, and often in the face of venomous criticism, to build bridges with fundamentalists, other evangelicals, Pentecostals, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and partisans of other religions. He refused to speculate about the fate of non-Christians, insisting that was God’s call, not his.

Of course, the mainline’s attitude toward Graham varied from person to person and from time to time. For example, Martin Marty, church historian, said in 1988, on the occasion of Graham’s 70th birthday, that though in the past he had grumbled about Graham’s approach, he judged that “left and right, liberal or conservative, mean less than mean and non-mean, and Graham—to our great fortune—has been ‘*non-mean*.’”

The Christian Century magazine had this to say about Graham after his death: “Like his contemporaries Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John Paul II, Graham seemed to soar above the political, cultural, and religious divides of the second half of the 20th century. He provided a compelling vision of peace—peace within, peace with neighbors, and peace with God. His ministry helped millions see that no matter how badly they had messed up their lives, Christ offered them a second chance.”¹

Let’s think about these things in terms of our Gospel reading for today—John 3:14-21—one of the most familiar parts of the Bible—but also (perhaps) one of the least understood.

You see, many of you (of a certain age) may have memorized John 3:16 as children in the King James Version:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

¹ Grant Wacker, *Billy Graham’s Legacy for Christians, Evangelical and Otherwise*, *The Christian Century*, February 21, 2018

For many Christians—regardless of denominational background—this verse is the most concise summary of the Christian gospel—and evangelical preachers, like Billy Graham (especially in the early part of his career), often built their messages around it.

And it's easy to understand why. Understood within the framework of a *new and novel* form of Christianity that gained traction within the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, called *Fundamentalism*, [Evangelicalism has been called fundamentalism with a smile!] (or what I'm calling "*Heaven and Hell Christianity*") forced a new "*template*" or "*framework*" onto more traditional understandings of the Christian faith.

And here's how it works with John 3:16 when we take it phrase by phrase:

For God so loved the world. This expresses a main Christian conviction that God loves the world. (But) it's how the rest of the verse is understood that gives it its distinctive meaning within the framework of *heaven and hell* Christianity.

That he gave his only Son (or in some translations, *his one and only son*): This is understood to mean both that Jesus is the only Son of God and that God gave him to die for the sins of the world. The "*giving of the Son*" means that *Jesus died in our place, so that we can be forgiven.*

So that everyone who believes in him: What we need to do is to believe in Jesus as God's only son and as the one who died for us. This is the path of salvation.

May not perish but may have eternal life: The consequence of believing in Jesus is survival of death and everlasting life, meaning heaven.

Sound familiar?

Now, to say the obvious, note how this understanding of the verse sounds the main themes of the *heaven and hell* Christian framework: we are saved (that is, get to go to heaven) by *believing* that Jesus is the only son of God, who died for our sins. Notice also how this puts a *condition* on the opening line, "*For God so loved the world*"; namely, *the love of God conditional*. Though God loves the world, only those who believe in Jesus will be saved. In extreme form (not all that uncommon), the verse means that God loves you, but God will send you to hell and eternal torment if you don't believe in Jesus.

But all of this is a significant misunderstanding of what John 3:16 means in the context of John's Gospel—the ancient or traditional understanding of the text (one of the confusing things about contemporary American Christianity is that forms that are relatively "new"—like fundamentalism or evangelicalism--are called "conservative" and "ancient" and "traditional" forms are called moderate or liberal!). The meanings of these terms are actually backwards!

Let's look at the text again within its ancient framework:

For God so loved the world: In John, as in the New Testament generally, *world* has two quite different meanings. One meaning is positive: *the world* is the world created by God—the *whole of creation!* The other is negative: *the world* is "*this world,*" meaning the humanly created world of cultures with their political and social domination systems. In John as in Paul, "*this world*" rejected Jesus. But God loves the divinely created world—not just you and me, not just Christians, not just people, *but the whole of creation.*

That he gave his only Son: John's Gospel does not include the notion of what's called *substitutionary atonement or sacrifice*: indeed, none of the Gospels do. The *giving* of the Son in John refers to the *incarnation* as a whole and not primarily to the death of Jesus. So, *how much does God love the world? So much that God was willing to become incarnate—take on flesh—in the world.*

So that everyone who believes in him. The ancient (premodern) rather than modern meaning of *believe* is intended here. In this verse, as in the Bible generally, *believe* does not mean believing theological claims about Jesus, but *loving* Jesus, giving one's heart, loyalty, fidelity, and commitment to Jesus. To believe is to *belove*. This is the way into new life.

Were you taught this in your Sunday School? Confirmation class? It should be!

May not perish but have eternal life: *Eternal life* is commonly understood to mean a blessed afterlife beyond death. But in John's Gospel, it is a *present experience*. The Greek words translated into English as *eternal life* mean "*the life of the age to come*." Within John's Theology, this is still future and to be hoped for. *But* it is also present, something that can be known, experienced now. Consider John 17:3:

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Note the present tense. This *is* eternal life (the life of the age to come); and its content is *knowing* God and Jesus. So, to know God and Jesus in the present is to participate *already* in the life of the age to come.

Thus, in John, this verse is **not** about believing a set of statements about Jesus *now* for the sake of heaven *later*. Rather, it is about *loving* Jesus and *loving* God as known in Jesus, in the incarnation, and entering into "*the life of the age to come*" **now**. It is **not** about people going to hell because they don't believe. *It is about the path into life with God now.*²

Now, I suspect that this ancient understanding of John 3:16 is actually quite "new" to many of you and (perhaps) a great relief to many others—the mainline churches have been impacted by the relatively "new" evangelicalism, as well.

But the ancient understanding also brings clarity—and peace of mind—with regard to our relationship to people of other religious traditions, as well. Think about it:

The claim that the creator of the universe is known in only one religious tradition has become increasingly unpersuasive to many millions, in part because many of us know people of other religions and also know that all religions, including Christianity, are particular historical responses to the experience of God, the sacred, in the cultures in which they originated. How, then, can anyone one of them truthfully proclaim itself to be the "*only way*?"

Again, the key is the realization that John is *incarnational Gospel*; in it Jesus incarnates, embodies, enfleshes what can be seen of God in human life

So, then, to say "*Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life*," is to say, "*What we see in Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life*" (John 14:6).

It is not about knowing the word *Jesus* and believing in what is said about him that is "the way"—this virtually amounts to salvation by words—believing the right words instead of other words. Rather, *the way* is what we see in his life; we see a life of loving God and loving others, a life of challenging the powers that oppress this world, a life radically centered in the God to whom he bore witness.

You see, the truth is that the *enduring religions of the world* all include lovers of God and saints in whom one can see the way, the truth, and the life. But for those of us who are Christians, we see *the way, the truth, and the life* preeminently in Jesus. He is *our way, our truth, and our life*.³

You may recall that at the beginning of this sermon I said that one of Billy Graham's gifts to the mainline was his evangelical ecumenism—he was a bridge-builder not only between disparate Christian groups, but also between

² Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian*, Harper One, New York, 2011, pp, 161, 162, & 163

³ *ibid.*, pp. 173, 174

Christians and other religious traditions. He refused to speculate about the fate of non-Christians, insisting that was God's call, not his.

He spoke about this in an article he published in *The Christian Century* way back in 1960:

"... during the past ten years my concept of the church has taken on greater dimension. Ten years ago my concept of the church tended to be narrow and provincial, but after a decade of intimate contact with Christians the world over I am now aware that the family of God contains people of various ethnological, cultural, class and denominational differences. I have learned that there can even be minor disagreements of theology, methods and motives but that within the true church there is a mysterious unity that overrides all divisive factors.

In groups which in my ignorant piousness I formerly "frowned upon" I have found men so dedicated to Christ and so in love with the truth that I have felt unworthy to be in their presence. I have learned that although Christians do not always agree, they can disagree agreeably, and that what is most needed in the church today is for us to show an unbelieving world that we love one another."⁴

In his travels around the world, I think Graham had the same experience as Mark Twain had, when he said:

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of [people] and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's life."

Remember: *For God so loved **the world**: God loves the divinely created world—not just you and me, not just Christians, not just people, but the whole of creation.*

Amen.

⁴ Billy Graham, *What Ten Years Has Taught Me,*, The Christian Century, February 17, 1960