

Let's set the scene. It's a Sunday school classroom, not unlike the one behind you. A dozen children sitting on chairs around a table, with a grown-up sitting with them on a chair much too small for her. This teacher is passing out the ingredients for today's object lesson: walnuts, nutcrackers, colored pencils, slips of paper the size of those you find in a fortune cookie, and, of course, glue, lots of glue. There is a gigantic bag of walnuts, because the kiddos are going to go through quite a number before they finally meet with success. Their goal is to crack one so that it splits open right along the center seam.

Each child takes their two perfect half shells and carefully removes all of the contents, the meat as well as that bitter brown stuff you sometimes eat by mistake. On a slip of paper each child then copies down: Capital "J," lowercase "o," "h," "n," the number "3," a colon, (two periods standing on top of each other, as one of the kids explains to another), and the number "16." John 3:16.

Then comes another tricky part; putting glue along the edge of the shell halves, not too much, not too little, placing the slip of paper half inside the shell, half out, with its message showing, and finally pressing the two shell halves together. The children hold their shells while the glue dries, and the grown-up opens the Bible to the passage I just read. "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."

"This is the Bible in a nutshell," the teacher says. "If you believe in Jesus, everything is going to be fine. If you don't...well....That's why all of you need to memorize

this verse," she says, "because it's the most important part of God's story." *Walnuts into congregation*

How many of you know it by heart? Lots of us had to memorize it in Sunday School, maybe with the walnuts, maybe without. Of course, it is not just Sunday school teachers that have suggested that the middle of today's Gospel is the entire Bible in a nutshell. There are thousands of ministers and lay people today who will tell you the same thing. Some theologians have also referred to John 3:16 in this way, including none other than Martin Luther.

Even if you have not heard that metaphor, I bet every one of you has seen or heard John 3:16 used to encapsulate the Christian message. Ever get handed one of those little tracts telling you that John 3:16 says everything we need to know about life? You know, the one that says on the front, "BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST OR PERISH?" Anyone care to guess what the most googled term was on January 9 of this year? Yep. How come? The night before was the evening of the College Football National Championship and Florida's quarterback Tim Tebow had John 3:16 written on his eye black. Perhaps you saw it this weekend multiple times during the cavalcade of NCAA basketball games. I've seen it painted on people's foreheads and naked chests. I've seen it on beer bellies on guys that should have never exposed their bodies to the light of day. It's printed on the most bizarre ad specialties, including glow in the dark key chains and Jesus erasers. In-n-Out Burger prints it on the bottom lip of their paper cups. The clothing store Forever 21 prints it on the bottom of their bags. I've seen it as graffiti in the most unbelievable places and received it as gifts printed on the tackiest religious art you

can imagine.

No matter where I see it though, I nearly always have the opposite reaction from what was intended. It makes me think, no wonder so many people think that all Christians are dorks. No wonder people look at me like I was dropped from Mars when I walk into a room with a clerical collar. I'm sure they are all just waiting for me to expose my John 3:16 tattoo in that place on my body they did not want to see.

But it's not just that. It angers me that anyone purporting to be the same religion as I am would dare reduce the heart and soul of my theology to such a simplistic sound bite.

It is true. Martin Luther was a critical theologian in the history of Christianity. But on this one, he, and everyone who has followed by describing John 3:16 as the Bible in miniature, have taken us down a dangerous path. It is not just the obvious danger of reductionist thinking and the trivialization of our faith. But when we take this particular verse and suggest that it represents the essence of Christianity, I believe we are doing irreparable damage to the Gospel of John. I believe that by taking this particular verse out of the story surrounding it and out of its historical context, it has done way more harm than it has good.

I believe understanding John 3:16 as the Bible in a nutshell has actually caused some of us to rebel against the Gospel of John, knowing that it is the book some Christians have used to convince people that Christianity is a religion of exclusion. I will admit to you that I was actually fearful about studying the Gospel of John when I entered seminary. I had come to believe that maybe John's Gospel really did say that Christians are saved and everyone else is condemned to eternal damnation. Just as damaging has

been the corollary lesson that people have drawn by reading John 3:16 out of context. Once you state your belief in Jesus Christ, then it's all done, your eternal life is assured, end of story.

Beloved, John 3:16 has a very powerful and important message for all of us. But we will never understand it if we detach it from its surroundings. This reductionist approach was described very well by one of those children taking part in the Sunday School walnut exercise. She looked down at her sticky walnut shell and then the heaping pile of nuts in the center of the table, then up at the teacher. "How can this be the very best part?" she asked? "We've taken out the part you can eat!" Indeed.

If you, like me, have also had an uneasy feeling about what we have done to John 3:16 and John's entire Gospel, my hope is that we can rescue it today. I urge all of you to not discard it because of how others have interpreted it. The authentic Gospel is here and it is too significant to miss. So here is what we are going to do. I want all of you who have one of those shells to stand up right now and put it under your foot and crush it. We don't want the shell, we want the meat. So here it comes.

John 3:16 takes us in two directions, first it tells us about God and secondly it talks about us. The God part comes first for obvious reasons. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son..." The Greek word that we have translated "world" is kosmos. This is the God that John's community has experienced. A God that cares not just for them, and not just for their neighbor, and not just for all of humanity, but one who cares for all of the universe, every plant, every rock, every star...the cosmos. The best analogy that the author can make is to compare the depth of God's love to the deepest love we can

experience as humans, the love of a parent for a child, the love of a parent who is willing to let their daughter or son go off to Afghanistan, even though they may never see them again. God's love is like that, but of course, even more than that.

What John is telling us is not a new revelation. It is the same experience of God expressed by many in the Hebrew text. It is the same God experienced in the first Biblical story. God watched as Adam and Eve lost faith in God, and turned instead to believing that they could be God. What results is that the cosmos that God has loved is broken by humans actions, and pain and suffering follows. But in the end, God's grace takes over. The next Bible story follows the same plot line. Cain and Abel forget that we are to love one another and instead choose to go to war with each other. Pain and suffering follows. Abel of course dies, and Cain is thrown out of his community, something as bad as death. But again, God forgives, God's last word is love for them and restoration of the brokenness of the world is restored. The next story is the flood. The world continues to sin, to try to be God, the cosmos is then broken because of humans acts, in this case waters cover the face of the world, but in the end, God's love for all of the cosmos spares us.

Many stories in the early Hebrew Bible follows this same plot line. Today's bizarre first reading, which sounds very weird to us, is the same story. The people have forgotten all that God has done for them. They start grumbling and complaining about the awful food and reminiscing about the great times in Egypt, when they were slaves. At least, they tell Moses, they had enough to eat...you know, real meat. What follows is another breaking of the natural order, in this case, the attack of the killer snakes. The point - God's creation is broken every time we screw up by thinking that we are God. And as

always, the last word is God's love for us and the world.

The God of the Hebrew Bible is the same God understood by John. It is a God who asks us to continue the journey, to not stop in the desert and start whining nostalgically about an ideal past, that we have created in our minds. The God of the Bible is a God who calls us continually out of security and comfort into unknown and risky futures. That is why you need to always be wary when someone suggests that we need to get that "old time religion." Whenever a religious leader says that we should return to the days of the past when religion was true, when people listened to God, not like the heathens of today, always be suspicious. Because if there is a consistent pattern in the Bible, it is a God who is always out ahead of us, calling us to continue the journey, to not stop where we are, and not return to some nostalgic vision of the past. We must continue the journey, just as God urged those in the story from Numbers.

Seeing our path to God as a journey is also how the author of the Gospel of John sees life. That is why the events in Jesus' life happen in a completely different order in the Fourth Gospel than they do in the other three Gospels. John's gospel is a progression, it shows us that the path to God involves an ongoing journey.

Luther's suggestion then, that John 3:16 is the Bible in a nutshell, is not so far fetched. It does begin by offering a summary statement that encapsulates God's love for us. But the problem with seeing this verse as a summary statement is the fact that it comes from the beginning of the Gospel of John. Everything at the beginning of this Gospel is at a very naive stage of development as the author tells us a story of ongoing maturation. This is what so many have missed when they see this as a synopsis of faith.

They go to the second part, the part about us. "...so that everyone who *believes* in him may not perish but have eternal life." Look they say. There it is. It's all so simple. Believe in Christ and it's done. You're saved. Don't believe and you are condemned to eternal perdition.

But if we put John 3:16 back where it belongs and we continue reading the story, we quickly learn that such an interpretation can't be what John had in mind. First of all, it contradicts the first half of the verse. But even more so, the rest of the Gospel takes us to a very different place. The key in understanding this verse and the Gospel is John's use of the word "believe". In the entire Gospel, he uses the word that we translate as believe, 89 times, way more than anywhere else in the Bible. When you read all 89 uses together, which I have actually done, you learn that John ALWAYS uses the word believe as a *verb*. To believe for him, has nothing to do with making a profession of faith, or accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Belief is not a tenet of religion, as we often use it, or a dogmatic statement, but it is an activity, it is something we are supposed to *do*.

This something is a *process*. Early in the journey or process of John's Gospel, believing is about seeing. Seeing the sign is believing, seeing what Jesus does, makes someone a believer. This is how Nathaniel believes earlier in this Gospel when he SEES Jesus under the fig tree. Nicodemus, in today's Gospel, has the same kind of belief. He comes to Jesus in the NIGHT, meaning that he has *not* yet seen the light. His statement of belief is NOT ENOUGH to bring him into the light, as John describes it. HE BELIEVES *only* because he sees. Thus what John 3:16 is really saying to us is that those who believe through signs like Nicodemus are infants on the journey.

As we read on in the Gospel of John, we learn that believing must be so much more than it is in John 3:16. The Samaritan woman at the well sees no signs like Nicodemus. She believes by understanding what he is preaching. John sees this as the next step on the journey. Hearing without seeing is a more mature form of belief. Baptism is the next step, because when you are baptized you proclaim the message to others without them ever seeing.

As we read on in the Gospel, we see even more mature forms of believing. The blind man can see when the Pharisees cannot. Martha understands that the raising of her brother Lazarus is about the opportunity of new life for all of us. She is illumined. She has moved beyond belief to an interior understanding of God. This is why at the end of the Gospel of John after Christ is risen, Christ says to doubting Thomas, "You have believed because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The point is that Nicodemus' belief as described in John 3:16 is an immature one at best, certainly not something we should be emulating. Hearing John's Gospel as the need for us to have a one time born again experience where we suddenly believe and then suggesting that after that we're all finished is to actually reverse what John is saying. Instead, he stresses that our road to God is a journey, a journey that may begin with belief as we understand it, but continues through the experience of baptism, then eucharist, and eventually into an interior knowledge of the presence of God. To live the Fourth Gospel, we must move way beyond John 3:16, we must always continue on the journey, an ever evolving path of growth and maturity toward God. The Gospel of John is the true Lenten

experience. We live our faith by doing it, on an ever evolving journey of conversion, baptism, Eucharist, into an inner realization that God is with us, a kind of illumination. From there, we continue the journey to union with God. May we have the courage during this Lenten season to hear God calling us ahead, to not look nostalgically back at the way things used to be, but to continue the sometimes scary journey into life with God. Amen.