

## Reformation Day Sermon — 10/31/21

Text — John 3:16

For God so loved the world that He gave His Only-Begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Theme — “God So Loves”

---

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I going to try to do something that is hard for any Lutheran — but especially one, like me, who loves history — I am going to try to deliver a Reformation Day sermon and NOT mention Martin Luther. At all. Do you think I can do it? Well, let’s find out.

I think we would all agree that it is the Gospel that defines the Christian Church. That the Gospel is the center, the heart, the very essence of what a Christian believes and trusts. Furthermore, I am sure that virtually all of us are aware that our text (John 3:16) has been called, with very good reason, “the Gospel in a nutshell”. And finally, as has been pointed out countless times before in Reformation Day sermons, it was that Gospel which was the cause of that Reformation. So, today, we will look at this great verse, bit by bit, and see what it has to say to us this Reformation Day. (pause)

St. John begins this brilliantly simple re-statement of the Gospel with these words: *“For God so loved...”* Right away John focuses us where we need to be: on God. HE is the subject, the Actor, the Doer in all this. That is, the Gospel is all about what GOD does, not us. The Law, well, the Law IS all about us. All about what is demanded and expected and required of us. “Do this, don’t do that” the Law says. Keep it all, keep it all PERFECTLY, keep it all perfectly all the time, keep it all perfectly all the time in all your thoughts/words/deeds — do THAT and you will live. But we do not. We cannot.

Not since Adam's sin in Eden. So, the Law does not — it CANNOT — save us. No, we need the Gospel. And here it is.

So it is that John wisely and correctly begins with resetting our focus. This Gospel is all about God and what He does. But also **why**. John makes that quite clear too here in these opening words, doesn't he? "*For God so LOVED...*" Elsewhere St. John tells us that God IS love. Meaning that all that He does, He does in love. And love is always about the benefit of the beloved, never the lover. If you truly love someone, you DO for them. Not in order to receive back, not to look superior, not to force them to return that love. No, you just do it. For the sake of the other. And nowhere is love better demonstrated than in the Gospel.

So, God is the One who loves. Perfectly. The One who gives. Everything. But to whom? For whom? That's the big question, isn't it? How would it be of any comfort or help or hope for me, if God did all this — but not for me? If God loved you, and you, and you — but not me? Or if, as Satan wants us to believe, that we have made ourselves too unlovable even for God? That our sins are too many, or too great, even for God? Well, John answers that by telling us that God "*...so loved the WORLD*"!

The world. That does not mean the globe or the planet (although He DOES love that too); it means He loves every single person on the face of the earth. Now and always. He loves Adam and Eve, the first people. He loves you and me. He loves the last person ever to be born. And everyone in between. There is literally NO ONE that is not loved by God. Think of that. It is truly staggering, isn't it? God loves everyone. Great or small. Good or evil. Of all races and languages and cultures. He loves Adam, despite his willful rejection of God. He loves Judas, despite his betrayal of Christ. He

loves Adolph Hitler, He loves Saddam Hussein, He loves Kim Jong-un, He loves the most vicious terrorist. And He loves YOU.

Now, certainly we do not deserve that love. No, as the Law plainly shows us, we are sinners who deserve only God's wrath and judgment and condemnation. But that is NOT what He gives us. Because He loves the whole world, including you.

Never do you need to feel left out or abandoned. Never do you need to pay heed to the devil's lies that God couldn't love you. Never do you need to think that His love ever ends or fails. No, God loves YOU. With an abiding and endless love. A love so great that He does what only **He** can do: He gives His own and Only-Begotten Son. (pause)

And here we see the depth of that great love. God gave His Only-Begotten Son. Ponder on that for a moment. Think of the Incarnation: God becoming man. How deep must His love be that He would condescend to become one of us. And not one of the elite, the rich, the ruling class. Oh, no. He became the lowest. Born to a young unmarried virgin (and what a scandal THAT was!). Born in a stable because His step-father Joseph could not secure a decent room. Welcomed only by barnyard animals and dirty old shepherds. Hunted by the king, whose assassins killed anyone who MIGHT have been Him. Growing up, dirt poor, in the little nothing town of Nazareth, in Galilee (a place so backward that people thought it a joke — "*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*"). A wandering Preacher and Miracle-Worker, who lived hand-to-mouth on the gifts of His followers.

But the most amazing is yet to come, isn't it? This Man is betrayed by one of His own; denied by another; deserted by all the rest. He is put on trial after trial, on trumped charges that even the judge had to admit were obviously untrue. But still, He was found guilty and sentenced to death on a cross. And there He died, all alone and forsaken by all. But infinitely worse than all of THAT was the

spiritual weight hung on Him there — the punishment for all sin, of all people, of all time. Imagine that! The hell merited for the sin of every person — from Adam to the last one to be born — it is ALL put onto Him. And He willingly suffers it. For YOU.

God gave His Only-Begotten Son. How easily those words trip off our tongues. And yet the magnitude of them. God gave. His Only-Begotten Son. What a price to be paid! And for what? For poor, miserable sinners. Worms and wretches and low-lives like you and me. Whatever could God see in us that would move Him to pay such a price? But that goes back to the previous words about God's love. Love gives. Love suffers. Love thinks only of the beloved. No matter the price, the consequence, the danger, the pain. And that love — with all its mind-boggling consequences — are for you. (pause)

So, how is this tremendous Sacrifice and its blessings made yours? After all, a gift does no one any good if it is not possessed. If someone died and left you a million dollars but you did not know about it, or take possession of it, what good would it do you? In the same way, Christ's suffering and death HAVE paid the full price for all sin. But how does that become YOURS? Well, simply — and solely — by faith. The verse says: "...*Whoever believes..*"

And here we get to the revolution that was the Reformation. Somehow that Gospel truth of "faith alone" had been blurred, even lost. And it is easy to see why. After all, we know that nothing is free. If want something, then you have pay the price. So, if we are to be forgiven and restored then we must certainly do SOMETHING, right? Wrong. As this verse plainly says. But old habits die hard. Old wisdom seldom passes. And so the natural inclination is to think we must do something in all this. Jesus did His part, now I have to do my own. Whether that be good works, or penance, or offerings, or whatever. But such thinking robs God of His true and legitimate glory. If we have ANY part in our

salvation — even the tiniest bit — it means God is not our Savior. At least not entirely. It means we claim some of what is rightfully His.

Furthermore, such thinking leads either to pride or to despair. Pride, in thinking we have done our part. Pride, in thinking we DESERVE God's grace (at least in some measure). Pride, in thinking we are better than others. Or it leads to despair, as we realize that we cannot do enough. Despair, in wondering or doubting our salvation. Despair, as we must place at least some trust in ourselves — and we know we are NOT trustworthy!

But, when we hear those words “...*whoever believes...*”, well, that changes everything. God does all the work; we simply receive it by faith. Just like the sun shone at creation when God said “*Let there be light...*”, so too do we believe when God speaks His Gospel Word to us — the sun could not claim any credit for shining; it was God's Word that did that. And so is it with us and our believing. God speaks His Gospel to us in baptism, in the preaching/teaching of His Word, in the Absolution, in the Lord's Supper. And there, by those Means, He causes and creates and sustains faith.

Just as God did all the work in our redemption — **Jesus** lived, **Jesus** died, **Jesus** rose — so too is it here in giving us the faith that takes hold of the gift. For it is the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith. It is the Holy Spirit who keeps us in that faith. It is precisely as we confess in the Small Catechism:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. (pause)

And the result? Eternal life. Think back to Eden, before the fall into sin. All that Adam and Eve had then, God restores to us. Our resurrected bodies, perfect and whole. No sickness, no aging, no hunger, no pain, no suffering. Our relationships, joyous and fulfilling. No fighting, no arguing, no racism, no rich or poor, no jealousy. Our place, majestic and exalted — God's children who rule His

creation with Him. Our world (the new heavens and earth), harmonious and beautiful. No bad weather, no natural disasters, no droughts or floods or earthquakes. And since there were animals in the first Eden (and since God says He will raise and restore “*all flesh*”), perfect companionship and enjoyment of their presence too.

But best of all — infinitely so — will be our relationship with God. We will know Him as He is. We will live forever in peace and communion with Him. Dear children with their dear Father. We can hardly begin to understand what that little phrase, “*everlasting life*”, truly means. But even the little, tiny bit we can grasp now makes us long all the more for its completion. It is why St. John would write in his Revelation of the Church and her cry: “*Come, Lord Jesus!*” Come, and give us that for which You have created us. Come, and relieve us of the pain and sorrow and suffering of this world — brought on by our own sin. Come, and make our joy complete. (pause)

That pure and simple Gospel is what the Reformation was — and still is — all about. The Good News that God has done everything Himself to restore us. We do nothing because we CAN do nothing. But, because He IS love, God has done it for you. And gives it to you. And keeps you in its blessings, now and forever.

So, how did I do in my effort to not mention Luther in this sermon? Well, apart from that quote from Luther’s Small Catechism, I think I was able to keep true to that intention. Because the Reformation is not about Luther. It is about the Gospel and what God has done to save YOU. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Offertory/Offering  
FE — Offertory/Prayers