

Sermon 10 March

Wendy is a mum, a mum to five-year-old twin boys. Having children was a big challenge for her. Ten years in the making and several rounds of IVF. Wendy and David thought it would never happen, but they never gave up hope. Wendy accepted Jesus into her life while a youngster attending Sunday School and as an adult, she knew her deep faith would see her through the tears and the tough times. She knew deep down that she was not in control, that the situation was in God's hands. Now, one of the real highlights of her week was as a teacher of the local Children's church and taking her boys along with her.

This particular Sunday morning Wendy was explaining the gospel reading from John chapter 3, verses 14-21; particularly John 3:16 that we know so well, to the children. Here is how the story went:

Every place in the world has an address to help us find where in the world that place is. To find our church, we go to 229 Ruahine Street, Terrace End, Palmerston North. The New World Supermarket is located on the corner of Broadway and Albert Street. To find my house, we go to this specific address. Knowing your address, we can find where you live. The address tells us where a place is.

But addresses are not just for houses and buildings. We use addresses in the Bible to help us find each of the many stories in this big book. And our Bible story today has one of the most famous addresses in all the world—John 3:16. This address tells us to look in the New Testament book of John, the third chapter, the sixteenth verse. Listen to the word of the Lord:

3:16 For God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not die but have eternal life. (GNT)

Did you hear that Wendy said to the children? For God loved the world so much...For God loves you so much...

Over and over we talk about how much God loves us.

And here is the address—John 3:16—where we find this fact written. This may be a postal address or in today's world it might be an email address or a website. It is also used on vehicle number plates.

I did a google search for www.John3.16.co.nz and received all kinds of interesting takes on John 3:16. Some religious and some not so much. In fact, I got everything from Manna Bookstores to Trade Me sites.

It is important for you to know your address so you can always find your way home. It is important for you to know this Bible address so you can always find your way...in life, wherever you are going.

For God loves you so much. Let us remember this address!

Repeat after me Wendy said: John 3 16 - the address of God's love.

I thought this was a lovely story While this is clearly a children's story it is also useful for each of us. Some call John 3:16 the world's favourite Bible verse.

John 3:16, the verse translated into more languages than any other piece of literature; the verse millions of children memorize before any other; the verse is also on big billboards at the roadside. You know, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

What would it be like if someone died for us? I suspect it's not all that hard for most of us to imagine the incredible sense of gratitude we might feel for that person. But now imagine that it wasn't just an impulsive act of bravery, someone pushing us out of the way of a car or something like that. Rather, someone knew we were in mortal danger and deliberately exchanged his or her life for ours. Suddenly, it's not just gratitude we may feel, but a profound sense of debt. How can we possibly make it up to someone who has given us so much? Well, this is essentially the picture Jesus offers of God. For the "giving of the Son" he references isn't simply sending Jesus to deliver a message, it's giving Jesus over to die, to die on a cross, to die on a cross for us. This is why, as Martin Luther once said, this verse is "the gospel in a nutshell."

The idea is profound. God doesn't ask our opinion about all this before it occurs. God doesn't ask our permission before hand. God doesn't even consult us. God just goes

ahead and gives the Son over to die...for us. It is out of our hands completely. We have no control. There is absolutely no room for our hopes and plans, our wants, or desires. It leaves us, that is, completely out of control.

Think about infant Baptism. We similarly bring young children to the baptismal font before they can offer their consent and simply immerse them in God's love. We don't wait until they are "of age" and can decide for themselves. But that's the heart of infant Baptism: God adopts us, makes us God's own, and pledges to be both with us and for us forever. All this whether we are ready, interested, or eager to receive it or not! "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...whether you *like it or not, whether you are ready or not.*" As a faith community we surround that newly baptised child with our Christian love and pledge to support them as they grow up in Christ and in their faith journey.

If God makes His great love for the world and us conditional, then we, suddenly, have tremendous power. We can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God's love. We can even tell God to 'push off' if we don't care for God's terms. But when God loves us--completely and unconditionally--and when Christ goes and dies for us, then there is just nothing we can do to influence God. And that's just what happens in this verse. "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." In the reading from Ephesians chapter two we are reminded of God's great love for us. By grace we have been saved. God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms with Him. *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

It is made rally plain for us: God in Jesus has made His decision...and it is *for* us. Yes, we can run. But we can't change the fact that God loves us, that God in fact loves the whole world more than we can imagine. And so, no wonder John 3:16 is the world's most popular Bible verse, because it is, indeed, good news, even the best news. But first it's hard. Hard because we're not in control. Hard because it's not up to us. Hard

because every time we hear how much God loves us, we also know that we had nothing to do with it, cannot influence it, and therefore out of our control. And, sometimes, that can make us anxious or fearful.

Perhaps trained by bitter experience to believe that no one, finally, can be trusted, or that life itself is such a gamble and so chaotic that we'd better stay in control no matter what, God's unconditional, uncontrollable love can cause us to be fearful. John says as much in today's reading: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed." Desiring to maintain some semblance of control at any cost, you see, we sometimes run from the light, fleeing God's loving embrace, only to find ourselves trapped in the darkness of our own devices.

But then along comes life, or God, or destiny, or tragedy, or whatever we want to call it, something that shakes us up, presents something utterly beyond our ability to cope, and drives us to our knees in despair--you know, like the end of an important relationship, or the death of a loved one, or the return of illness, or the loss of a job--and we realize in a flash of painful insight that we never were in control. In a world that craves control, we don't have control. Not of our life, not of circumstances or fate, and certainly not of God. And suddenly, this difficult, disturbing, even offensive message about God's grace becomes the best news we can imagine. Because here it is: precisely because we are *not* in control of God and therefore not in control of our relationship with God, we realize that it is the one relationship we can't mess up, the one relationship that we can't muck up. God has taken responsibility for this one. And God has promised to bring it to a positive end.

This is why we might find John 3:16 so difficult...and at the same time so desperately hopeful and life-giving. Indeed, this is why it can be both the least and the most favourite verse in the Bible: because it promises that God will never let us go, that God will not take "no" for an answer, that God will pursue us like the intrepid hound of heaven until we are God's own.

Does that mean that we have nothing to do, nothing to contribute to this most important relationship? Definitely not! Once we have been loved this fully, this completely, we can respond in love, honouring God and sharing the news of God's love for the world with all we meet. Further, we can love each other, throwing ourselves into struggles and celebrations all around us, always working for the good of our neighbour and the world, propelled forward by the knowledge that God loves us and this world so very much. So, there's plenty to do. But we do it all knowing that we are messengers, witnesses to what God has done for us, not managers. We are messengers rather than managers. God needs messengers, he doesn't need managers.

So, hear both the judgment and promise of this passage once again. We are not in control--of this world or even our life, not really. But the God who created the vast cosmos will hold onto us amid the chaos, love us even when we feel most unlovable, and bring us to eternal life. As St. John writes and as Jesus' cross and resurrection guarantees, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Like it or not. In the verse that we know so very well.

John 3:16 is the address of God's love for each of us.

Amen.

