

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*My faith looks up to thee, thou Lamb of Calvary,
Savior Divine! Now hear me while I pray,
Take all my guilt away; O let me
From this day be wholly thine. Amen.*

“The Fourth Gospel (John’s Gospel) bears from one end to the other the mark of the powerful genius who conceived it. What comes through the crucible of John’s powerful intellect and mystical soul is infused with a single idea: the eternal Christ, the divine source of light and life.” So writes Evelyn Underhill in her famous work, *The Mystic Way*.

She is right. For me John’s Gospel has glorious words on the surface, but it is as if they are illumined from behind. There is shining through them the powerful light of Christ, the light of acceptance and redemption. This is no more true than in John 3:16, a text known and loved by all of us. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” What extraordinary words. What an extraordinary life of faith in God that shines through these words. What an extraordinary Christ who is these words.

There was a time, a while ago now, when it was a popular practice of some Christians to go to sporting events with a sign that simply read “John 3:16.” When the television cameras panned the crowd as part of the broadcast, “John 3:16” signs were broadcast into millions of homes. I remember watching a Nebraska football game on TV, broadcast from the University stadium in Lincoln, and there were the signs, “John 3:16.” Instinctively, I repeated the words aloud to myself from memory: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” I could feel the extraordinary and undeserved love of Christ shining through the words as rays of Divine grace, and my heart was full. There it was, hidden amid tens of thousands out for the sport, amid millions watching on TV, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shining through every distraction to touch me. Amazing. Genuinely amazing.

Now we, as Episcopalians, are used to hearing John 3:16 in a particular context. We have confessed our sins, absolution has been given, and then come the Comfortable Words, one of which is, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” *Comfortable* in this context is an archaic use of the word that means powerful or redemptive. Words that lift us out of the eternal death of sin into the eternal life of Christ. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we should not perish, but have life.

The power of these words in the context of the confession of our guilt and sin is profound. God does not overlook our sin. God looks our sin straight in the face. God demands that we look at our sin straight in the face.

After all, in the Book of Numbers, when God tells Moses to lift up the bronze serpent so that those who were perishing could look upon it and live, God does it even while the Hebrews were speaking against Moses and against God, complaining in fear that they will die eating miserable food and being bitten by snakes. God sent redemption even though they sinned against him.

The Epistle to the Ephesians makes this even clearer. "You are dead in your sin and trespasses in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of evil, whose spirit is now at work in you who are disobedient." The light of Christ that shines through John's Gospel makes our sin all the plainer, all the more despicable.

Paul Tillich, in his sermon, "*You are accepted*," talks about it this way. "Grace strikes us when our disgust of our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage."

"At that moment," Paul Tillich continues, "a wave of light breaks into our darkness, as through a voice were saying, 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is redemption, whose name we do not know.'" We do not do anything. We do not seek for anything. We simply accept the reality that you are accepted in a profound and deep and inalterable love. Robert Capon wrote in his wisdom-filled cookbook, *The Supper of the Lamb*, "There is no sin you can commit that God in Jesus has not forgiven already. The only way that you can get yourself into Dutch is to refuse forgiveness. That's hell."

If stubborn refusal of God is hell, then the acceptance of grace, acceptance of forgiveness, acceptance of Christ, is life. Pure grace. Pure gift.

For years, Annamarie came into her favorite Starbucks in Tacoma, Washington, for a morning jolt of caffeine. The Starbucks barista, Sandie, served her every day. They spent only seconds in casual conversation, but over the years they formed an invisible bond.

When Annamarie mentioned that her kidney was failing, Sandie found herself saying, "I'll be tested. You can have one of my kidneys." They were a perfect match, and the transplant took place. Sandie gave her kidney without thinking. She just did it. Annamarie graciously accepted it. "It's like I just got a new sister I never knew I had." Pure grace, purely given, purely received. Why? For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The gift of Christ is waiting for you today. You need only accept it.