

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

Our gospel today contains perhaps THE best known verse of Holy Scripture. You know it well: “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*” That’s the way many of us learned it, and that’s how we want it recited.

Moreover, to ignore this verse in our preaching, or to pass over it, would be to ignore the proverbial elephant in the room, for this verse has come to be iconic.

You know what an icon is. It’s an image. Icons are important for us — if we know what they mean. They help us traverse the complexities of life. For example, road signs: you have to know your road signs and the icons that are on them in order to pass your driving test, but more importantly, so that you can drive safely, so you know when the road is going to be divided by a median, or you know when construction is causing your two lanes to go down to one or that an intersection is coming up or perhaps a stoplight, etc.

With our graphical user interfaces on our computers and smart phones and tablets, icons are the way we traverse them. Icons identify files and folders and apps, and help us navigate these complex systems.

We have icons all around the church — stained glass representations, for example, of the things of the faith—including Jesus. Jesus Himself is iconic. He’s the icon, “*the image of the invisible God,*” St. Paul reminds us. He shows us the Father, for as St. John tells us, “*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.*” Moreover, He is the symbol of our faith. His image is all over our sacred space, for we are Christians, and these images remind us that we follow Christ, and that there is no other way to the Father. I pity the poverty of those Christians worshiping in spaces that don’t have the rich iconography that we have here at Zion.

Now I referred to this well-known verse of Holy Scripture as iconic, and it is in a couple ways. Actually, all you need to see is the reference: John 3:16, for when you see that, what is brought to mind? If you’re like me, when you see John 3:16, you immediately picture in your mind the verse: “*For God so loved the world....*” That makes it iconic.

But the verse is also iconic in that it evokes deeper meaning. But of what? Here is where this icon begins to betray many, for what is this iconic verse focused on?

For many today, this verse is all about love: “*For God so loved the world*” And that’s right as far as it goes; but if that’s all the farther you go, you miss what that love means. If that’s as far as you go, and your focus is only on love, you might re-define God’s love as your love, and you might make the “*purpose and goal*” of the church as loving God and loving people, rather than telling people that

God loves you, and that He did it in a specific way, and that He still loves you and wants you to receive the fruits of that love.

And why play fast and loose with even such an iconic verse like John 3:16? Because “*the vast majority of Americans are spiritually restless,*” we’re told. Because people are experiencing “*holy discontent*” with the church because the church is out-of-step with them. That’s right! The church is going to have to change her ways. So, I know. Let’s be “*innovative and creative, powerful and inspiring, engaging and life giving,*” by saddling them with the law. Love God and love people — yes, that’s it—the two great commandments—“*love is the fulfilling of the law.*”

For this verse is SOOO misunderstood, if it’s just all about love that I get to define for myself. For God SOOO loved the world, as if that word that is translated “so” has anything to do with the quantity or quality of God’s love.

And don’t misunderstand. God’s love is indeed without measure. His love is mind-boggling. But that’s not what this verse is about, and it doesn’t give us free reign to decide for ourselves how God’s love might be manifested, saying things like, if God is love, that love would never condemn, for Jesus didn’t come to condemn, but to save—indeed Jesus was not sent to condemn, but to save, but to do it in the way God sets forth. Or saying, a loving God would never require a faith exclusively in the Son. It’s just not loving. But Jesus does say, “*I am the way*”; and “*no one comes to the Father except through me.*” Love would never call people away from self-chosen works, the passions of our flesh, the desires of the mind. I mean, who are we to judge? Love would never call people out of darkness — people love darkness. If you come to the light your works — sinful works — might be exposed. But, in fact, that’s exactly what needs to happen, that you might despair of your self, and look truly to God’s love.

For God’s love is manifested in this way — it’s iconic. For that little word translated “so” here — and that’s an okay translation, but it’s easily misunderstood — that word translated “so” doesn’t mean “so much,” but it really means “thus” or “in this manner.” And that word is important, because, even though we don’t see it in the English, it’s the first word in that sentence.

So that the emphasis is on “*in this manner.*” “*In this manner, God loved the world.*” What manner? In the foolish manner that God told Moses to lift up a serpent on a pole in the wilderness. How foolish is that? Get bit by a fiery, poisonous serpent; you are about to die; so look at a bronze serpent on a pole. Right! But they did, and they were saved. In like manner, this is the gift of God’s love to you. God’s own Son given to be lifted up in like manner on a pole. When you hear this iconic verse “*for God so loved the world,*” this is what your mind should picture: Jesus on a cross.

For God's love has everything to do with Jesus being lifted up. God's love has everything to do with lifting up our eyes in faith to Him who was lifted up. God's love has everything to do with Him whose perfect flesh had to be lifted up on a pole because mankind's flesh is corrupt and corrupting and causes death. God's love has everything to do with Him who was lifted up to die, that by His death, death might be destroyed. God's love has everything to do with Him who was raised up to life again, that He might lead us to everlasting life.

That little word that gets translated "so" in that verse is meant to point us back to the previous sentence that talks all about the Son of Man being lifted up in foolishness on a pole. Just as the Lord told Moses to put that bronze serpent on the pole in the wilderness, and foolishly asked the Israelites to look at it, so also, we who have been bitten by sin from birth and condemned to die are called to look to the Son and believe in Him lifted up. By grace you have been saved. By grace you have been forgiven. By grace you have been made alive. It's the folly and weakness we heard about last week, but we know it's the wisdom and strength of God, this word of the cross. Jesus is our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. He is our light and our salvation. He is our life.

John 3:16. We love that verse. What Christian doesn't know it? It's iconic, but iconic, I pray in the sense that it brings to your mind the Son of Man lifted up for you, for your forgiveness and life.

And if this iconic verse works that way, let me suggest it can work the other direction, too. That is, may this verse, rightly understood, be so much a part of you that whenever you see Jesus, the Son of Man, lifted up high upon the pole, crucified for you, God's gift of His Son sent to perish that we might not perish, that it brings to your mind this verse, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

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