

I have been plagued by perplexing questions this week. The first question was whether I would be able to drive from my home outside of Decatur to the church here this morning in light of the marathon and whether or not I can offer extra credit to the faithful remnant who did. The second question was how to disrupt cut-through traffic in our east parking lot after Speedy Gonzalez nearly ripped the front end of my car off cutting through from Morningside to Wessyngton. The third question was what exactly is that stuff that football players put on their faces to reduce glare... and does it still work when you write stuff on it? The answer is that last one is that it is called eye-black, it's made up of paraffin, beeswax and carbon, and to answer whether or not its efficacy is compromised by writing on it, I would posit that whatever one thinks of Tim Tebow as a football player, the addition of 3:16 to his eye-black does not appear to have adversely affected his game. I'll leave the deeper theological questions of whether God cares about football to be sorted out by the fine scholars at *Saturday Night Live*.

"3:16" does strike me as being the zenith of most folks' familiarity with the Gospel according to John. The evangelist may have written elegant theology in the prologue, structured a narrative so brilliantly that each story within it is a microcosm of the larger picture as people encounter Jesus, see the signs he has wrought, and look ahead to coming glory... it is brilliant, but when people think of John, 3:16 comes to mind.

It is one of those phrases, like the whole 23rd psalm where we reflexively revert to the King James English even if we've never read a King James Bible; "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

That brought me to my fourth perplexing question of the week – what does that mean? Now, I know that with 508 members in this congregation, we have 508 different faith stories of how we came to know Jesus Christ and what a difference it has made in our lives. 508 different faith stories, but I hope that they have a common thread that runs through them: that in Jesus Christ, we know ourselves to be God’s beloved children. I hope that the common thread is that we know what God has done for us.

The problem with 3:16 is that culture seems to be very content to take it out of context and treat it as a measuring stick with which to gauge whether or not we are saved, and perhaps also whether or not God is good. That first problem, I think, is reasonably obvious, the second, perhaps not so much. Let’s take a look at them.

The first problem is the question of atonement – how does something get done about our sin.

Please note the way that is phrased: how does something get done about our sin... because the way that we answer that question is going to provide the answer to the second question about whether or not we can look at this passage and see a God who is good.

I deliberately did not ask, *how do we do something about our sin?* I didn’t phrase it that way because if there is one thing that would cheapen what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, it would be to claim that we have done it ourselves. And there is a very subtle way that we make that claim and this verse is frequently used to do so. It’s done this way: we make believing in Jesus into an act that we do, or attest to do, in order to be saved. It is very, very subtle and it has a name – semi-pelagianism, if you want to show off theological jargon – and it is a pervasive part of modern Christianity.

Pelagianism was a controversy in the early church that we all will recognize by its modern name: works righteousness. What that means is that if we are good, God loves us. If we do good works, we are going to be saved. Semi-pelagianism purports something that sounds like a rejection of that teaching: it says you don't have to do a thing for God to love you. God already loves you and wants to save you. All you have to do is believe in Jesus.

Now I know that you have heard something like that somewhere... it is such a part of evangelical revivalism, which really is part of our national understanding of faith. It's the idea of "getting saved."

We get saved, to be sure, but not because we've done anything about it. When we make our declaration that salvation is something that God has done, it's not a matter of degrees... God didn't do everything for us but that last thing, that last act of believing. God did it all in Jesus Christ.

Otherwise it wouldn't be "whosoever believeth," but rather "whosoever behaveth," meaning, if you behave this way: if you attest to belief, then God loves you.

Why am I spending so much time on right-thinking about salvation? After all, we do have many different faith stories that express the many different ways that we have come to know Jesus?

Because that brings us to our second question: what we believe about how God treats us determines what we believe about the goodness of God.

A while back I did a favor for a friend that made a job she had to do vastly easier. Still, she did the majority of the work so I called her to congratulate her on a job very well

done. After I finished commending her, she replied, “well, you pretty much just dropped me off on top of the marathon mountain and all I had to do was run downhill.”

That’s not the way it works with God. God does it all.

Salvation is not a litmus test. That’s why verse 17 is so important: God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world through him might be saved.

That is how God does something about our sin. God does the saving.

“Wait,” you might think, “I thought Jesus saves. I thought God was the one who judged and Jesus is the one who saved.”

This is one of those points where a little Trinitarian theology goes a long way. You say the words, “Trinitarian Theology” and peoples’ eyes start to glazing over, but hang in there with me, it won’t hurt: here’s what is important to know:

First, the doctrine of the trinity is that there is one God. There isn’t a senior God (the father) and two associate gods, (Jesus and the Holy Ghost.) There’s one God, classically understood as father, son and Holy Ghost. One God. Let me hammer it home one more time: one God.

Three expressions, three ways of being known: again, father, son and Holy Ghost. Not “daddy, junior and the spook.” We’re not talking about personalities. That would make them three again. One God, three expressions. I’m going to gloss over a lot here, but stay with me, because this is the important part: what the one does, they all do.

When one suffers, they all suffer – you see where I’m going with this – God the judge doesn’t demand the sacrifice that Jesus the son makes. One GOD!!! In other words, God doesn’t sacrifice Jesus, God is the sacrifice in Jesus!

That's John's point. That is going to be John's point throughout his whole Gospel narrative. Jesus says over and over again in John, "the Father and I are one." No one makes me do this thing I'm going to do, I do it of my own accord. One God.

It's so important to make sure we're asking the right questions, don't you think? And in this case, the question we should ask is, "what is John trying to show us?"

John is not trying to tell us what we have to do to be saved. John is trying to show us who God is by the nature of what God has done. This is John's way of describing how God has saved the world that God loves.

Perhaps we should back up. This whole passage is part of a larger conversation that Jesus is having with Nicodemus.

You remember Nicodemus? He is the member of the government who came to Jesus under the cover of darkness to see who he is and what he is about.

And this is where Jesus uses his timeless tactic of taking the conversation from the material level to the spiritual level. This, too, is a repeated tack in John. Jesus always seems to be saying, "you think it's about this, but really, it's about this."

Immediately prior to this exchange about salvation, Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, asked Jesus essentially this, "So, let's talk about these signs you're doing. How are you doing them?"

Jesus replied with familiar words that we've heard about being born again, which Nicodemus, very predictably mistakes as literal. "How can you *be* born again," he wonders aloud.

Nicodemus is thinking at the one level and Jesus answers at another...

Nicodemus is thinking, “how is this going to affect the temple,” and Jesus is answering, “This is who God is.”

Two different levels of looking at God: the superficial and transformative. The superficial is concerned with the mechanics. The transformative is concerned with what believing in Jesus does to us.

So which will it be?

Not too long ago there was a YouTube video that went viral. (If like me you need a translator for terms in the cultural vernacular, that just means it spread quickly, like a virus.) The video featured a very hip young man reciting a poem, “Why I Hate Religion But Love Jesus.”

What followed in the video were a number of modestly scathing attacks on the church punctuated by culturally conditioned theological claims. People loved it... it was on facebook, and what I considered fascinating was the number of people who chose to write something about their faith.

And then the theologians piled on.

The poem was an easy target. From a rhetorical point of view, it was easy to take apart. It was a series of false dichotomies, they said. And they were right. And the author, Jefferson Bethke very humbly said, “you’re right.”

The problem was that it was the theologians who missed the point.

He wasn’t writing a systematic theology – he was expressing his belief in the person of Jesus Christ and the transformational life that he believes comes with that faith.

There are few people who will mount a more robust defense of good theology than me. I believe what we believe matters. What we believe matters deeply because what we

believe about God forms the basis for much of how we perceive ourselves and our places in the world – and how we view others and their place in the world. It matters.

But even more than what we believe matters, what that believing *does* to us matters. We can keep our questions at the superficial level when it comes to this text: we can wring our hands over the scope of atonement and just what has to be done to be saved, or we can encounter this text – and Christ – at a transformational level where the reality that we believeth moves us from inquirer to disciple.

Nicodemus was an inquirer. Jesus was calling disciples.

Fretting over what we have to do to be saved leaves our encounter with Jesus at the level of inquiry.

Trusting that God has done everything for our salvation allows us to move to discipleship.

Belief that God has done everything for our salvation frees us to move from suffocating self-interested concern about our lives to living as Jesus' disciples.

And that's really the point of all this.

For all the folks who have 3:16 written on their faces, the question is, “what's written on your lives?”

And for all of us who don't wear 3:16 in our eye-black, indeed, for all of us who perhaps struggle with the idea of *believing*, and perhaps are worried about what that means for our souls, there is this: if we take seriously the belief that God did it all in Jesus, that God, “did not send the son into the world in order to condemn the world, but so that the world might through him be saved,” then our orders are clear too.

We can trust God about our salvation and get on with the business of being disciples.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.