

“GOD LOVES”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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(transcribed from audio file)

Our scripture reading today comes from the gospel of John 3:16

*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.*
NRSV

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When Rob asked me to write and share this message I was flattered and a little freaked out. As I kept reading the email and realized I would be talking about literally the most popular Bible verse in the whole world, it made saying yes, a lot easier. If he had asked my thoughts on Leviticus or Revelation I would have found a way to be out of town today. But have you ever noticed the things that seem simple, aren't? It turns out the simplicity of this verse tricked me. I made three false assumptions about it that I'd like to share with you.

The verse is all about love. FUPC's theme for summer is love and love is so key to the human experience. One of my favorite authors, Terry Pratchett, includes the character death in nearly all of his novels. Death, who looks about like who you'd expect, speaks in all CAPS and has a soft spot for kittens, is fascinated by humanity and studies the subjects closely. When someone once asked him, what would humans be without love? "Rare", was his reply.

Surely our cultural choices would reflect our love of love. Top music I assumed would be full of it. Love is, we are told, all around, in all we need and even a many splendored thing. So, I decided to look up the ten biggest billboard charting songs of all time. Certain that the majority of them would be about love. Seems safe, right? How wrong I was.

Here's a playlist based on how long they stayed in the top of the charts.

#10 is the inescapable Ed Sheeran hit, Shape of You. While he does mention love, it's purely physical. He literally says, "I'm in love with your body." I'll give this one a – kind of.

Following, we get the Macarena. While I'm not sure what it's really all about, my high school level Spanish tells me the lyrics are pretty risqué and I can't believe great Aunt Helen danced to it at all your weddings.

Also on this list, bobby Darin's Mack the Knife. I feel more confident with the lyrics of this one, since it's an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's Three Penny Opera, which I must have studied at some point having been a German major. This 1960's hit catalogued the crimes of a murderous highwayman. Charming, right?

There are a few that have appeared on a high school dance list. Party Rock Anthem, Uptown Funk, I Gotta Feeling. Even The Twist. They cover the love of a good time, but nothing much deeper.

How Do I Live pops up. 15-year-old LeeAnn Rimes shares her fear of being abandoned by her true love. How will I ever survive and wonders how she'll get through even one night without him. If you're like me, you're getting the ache right now which made the rest of the listening public so uncomfortable that a 30 something Trisha Yearwood released a competing version. So, another – kind of.

Then we get Carlos Santana/Rob Thomas's sultry hit, Smooth. This is probably the closest to a love song. They say, I could change my life to better suit your mood. How often have we done exactly this for the people we love? I'm not sure I want to do the personal inventory of how often my husband Andy has done that for me. So, we can count this one.

And number one has us in the Blinding Lights with the Weekend, which has glimmers of love. You can show me how to love, maybe, but seems to me to be more about the need for someone's touch, the need for sleep, not love, exactly.

So that's 1 yes, 3 kind-of's, and 6 no's. Those poll results are not in my favor and I'm a person who likes to win. This did not bode well for me.

The next thing I was wrong about was who actually said, *for God so loved the world*. I have heard this verse hundreds of times in my life, so, I assumed it was something John had written about Jesus. John is the most poetic of the gospel writers and used the word love, 57 times - more than the other 3 gospel writers combined. He refers

to himself as the disciple Jesus loved. He loves love. He even gives us a remix of it in 1 John 4:7-12. *Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way. God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love. Not that we love God but that he loves us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much we ought also to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

So, it just sounds like something John would have said, but he didn't say it. Jesus did. If we back up in the passage and read more carefully than I had done, because context is key, we see that Jesus had been talking to Nicodemus, a learned man, a teacher of the people, one who knew the scriptures better than any of us certainly. He should have been Jesus' best student. I know a little something about teachers as students, so this scene seems familiar to me. Nicodemus didn't get it and he kept pushing and didn't get it. This is a theme that's played throughout all of history. God says, "See, I love you. Show me you love me. This is how." And humans refuse to get it.

In the creation story Adam and Eve had everything they could possibly want or need because God loved them and made all things good. God showed them how to love him. Be fruitful. Take care of each other in the garden. But they did the one thing they were told not to do. They didn't get it.

When the Israelites escaped from Egypt and were brought to the Promised Land, God again showed them he loved them and how to love him back. They ignored his Commandments. They were written down right there. They could see them. There's only 10 of them. They are easy to understand. They didn't get it.

To summarize the rest of the Old Testament because I'm not doing the whole thing. Good kings. Evil kings. Captivity. Liberation. Profit after profit. They didn't get it. And let's not let ourselves off the hook here. Smug is not a good look on anybody. We have the advantage of seeing history unfold with Christ in the center of it. We have access to all the world's knowledge at our fingertips. We've had profits living among us. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mia Angelou, and we reduce them to inspirational "generating machines".

Does the world know that we are Christians by our love? Yes! We haven't gotten it. Jesus says it as plainly as possible. "God loves you. I came for you. Believe it."

And because I don't always get it either I realize I made another huge mistake pretty much every time I've encountered this verse. I've always assumed that this verse was about Jesus' death, but it never actually says that. Jesus gave us his life, not just his death. We do experience God's love through Christ's death and resurrection, but we can't ignore Christ's life. "See, I love you," God said. "Show me you love me. This is how. Just watch my son."

Jesus loved his parents even as his role as the Son of God forced him to defy them at the temple, even as he knew how he'd have to leave them. On his way to his crucifixion, he made sure Mary knew how much he loved her. He considered her pain in the face of his own.

He loved his disciples. He chose each one of them. Taught and challenged them. He loved the impulsive Peter and doubtful Thomas. He even loved Judas, fully knowing what he would do. He came back to hang out with his disciples, his friends, after his resurrection, because he knew they still needed him. And when he did have to leave, he didn't leave them alone. The Spirit came to keep the love flowing.

He loved the women in his life. He honored Mary and Martha and recognized their gifts and devotion. He loved and trusted Mary Magdalene and the women with her, to be the first to spread the good news of his resurrection.

He loved the crowds that followed him and demanded all of his time and energy. He touched and healed them. He fed them because fed people feel loved.

He even loved the Pharisees and those who challenged him. He could have ignored and dismissed them, but he engaged with them, because when you love someone, you tell them the truth even when you know they're motivated not to believe it.

Some of his final words on the cross were those of love, asking for forgiveness for those who were torturing and murdering him.

And he loved all of us, people he hadn't met but still knew and gave up his love-filled life for us.

So easy! Right? That's our example. If you're like me the first part seemed pretty doable. Family. Friends. Crowds, even. I can love them, I guess, but I've run across a Judas and a Pharisee or two in my life and love was not my first impulse. But love doesn't have boundaries, based on our own comfort. Jesus made it as

simple as he could. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.

“I love you”, God says. “Show me you love me. My Son showed you how.”

“God loves you, Christ said. “I came for you. Believe it.”

“God loves you,” the Holy Spirit says. “Christ came for you and so did I. Let me help you believe it.”

If we take a look at God’s Playlist, we see that he’s been playing us love songs since the first moment of creation. Let’s play these songs on repeat. Add them to our own playlist and share them with anyone who might need to hear a great love song today.

Amen.