

**“No Greater Love”**  
**John 3: 14-21**  
**March 26, 2006**

Love is a favorite topic of many. It is a word we use and attach to almost anything. A quick search on the Internet reveals some interesting things. There is a “Love Calculator” site in which you can determine if you are “in love”. There is a site with “love poems”, a “free love test”, and a comic page of love cartoons. Then there are the “I Love” sites including: “I Love New York”, “I Love Dogs” and “I Love Bees”.

Of course there are hundreds----thousands of songs about love, about lost loves, how to love, and so forth. We can buy “love seats” at a furniture store and now can become computer matched to the perfect “lover”.

And we never tire of the boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and boy finds girl again stories---with reverses and variations. Yet for all our talk about love we seem to have little understanding about it. With all our talk about love one would think that our culture would be one of the most loving societies in the world. We are not the worst but we are far from the best. There is violence all around us. There are cutting remarks, putdowns, hate, racism, and the cutthroat competition that we engage in with little thought to the idea of “love”.

There are also abundant misconceptions about love. We use the word so freely that we rob it of any real meaning. We: “love our car”, “love our Ipod”, “love our music”, “love our spouse”, and “love our blue jeans.”

So when we come to a passage such as John 3:16 that is so familiar do we understand what it means? We “love” the phrase (a bit of a pun), “**God so**

**loved the world**” because it gives us warm and fuzzy feelings. But what is behind those words?

-1-

These words are spoken within the context of a story—the story of Nicodemus. Perhaps even this story is too familiar to us. We picture Nicodemus slinking through the dark, back alleys to see Jesus in such a way that his friends would not see him. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and we ALL KNOW THAT PHARISEES and Jesus did not mix well. Or do we know that? Is that something we just read into the story?

Could it be that Nicodemus comes “at night” because that was the only time he could come? Or could it be that John, the writer of the gospel, is using the images of “light” and “darkness” to symbolize enlightenment and ignorance? Nicodemus coming at night could be no more than a dramatic element that underscores that Nicodemus was still operating spiritually “in the dark”!

The text for today encompasses part of the response that Jesus makes to Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus that only God can really create the “new birth” that he is referring to. This new birth will become possible through the death of Jesus. Jesus, in the story, quotes a verse from Numbers 21:4-9 as a reference point---in John’s mind---to resurrection. In the Numbers text the Hebrew’s even after their escape from Egypt were still unhappy with God. God’s response is a plague of poisonous snakes that kill many people. Then, according to Numbers, in an act of grace and love God instructs Moses to put a snake on his staff and those who look upon the snake will be healed. The snake

that brought death now brings life. The cross that brought death to Jesus now becomes the way of Life.

Following this John the writer of the gospel---not Jesus---makes a comment---“God so loved the world...” John is making this comment to a church that was most likely encountering stressful and difficult times. He wants to remind the church and to introduce the non-churched to the story of Jesus that brings light and life to all.

-2-

John is here talking about **GRACE**. Grace is unmerited and undeserved love by God for us. For John the resurrection of Jesus was not about Jesus but was about God. It is God who LOVES THE WORLD so much that God is willing to allow the world’s hate to kill the Christ and then answers that hate with an action of love.

Grace is a difficult concept for most of us to understand. Grace is not very prevalent in our culture at this particular time. Vengeance is more prevalent than grace---punishment more prevalent than mercy. Grace, like mercy, is often associated with weakness.

Our movies depict this “in your face” attitude. In the movie “Dirty Harry”<sup>1</sup> Harry seeks revenge and justice with a gun---not grace and mercy. Remember the line from the movie:

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<sup>1</sup> Dirty Harry (1971) was the first of a series of movies starring Clint Eastwood as Inspector Harry Callahan. The 1971 movie directed by Don Siegel has become a cult classic. Dirty Harry is known for his violent justice than his mercy. The tagline for the original movies was, “you don’t assign him to murder cases. You just turn him loose.” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt006999>.

Dirty Harry confronting a criminal: ***“I know what you’re thinking. ‘Did he fire six shots or only five?’ Well, to tell you the truth, in all this excitement I kind of lost track myself. But being as this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you’ve got to ask yourself a question: Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya punk?”***<sup>2</sup>

Elected officials can lose elections if they are perceived as too merciful and too graceful toward enemies. Businesses can go broke if they show too much mercy to competitors. And who would support a football or basketball team that demonstrated mercy and grace?

Yet, grace is the cornerstone of our faith. When we get a glimpse of grace---as we do here in John---our spirits are uplifted and the day becomes brighter.

**Duane**, his brother and I were enjoying a lazy summer day. I don’t remember who started it. It just sort of happened. We were lounging in Duane’s back yard when someone threw a raspberry from their well tended and ripening raspberry patch. No one knows who fired the first shot---but mercy has no place in a berry fight. And what a fight it was!!! Berries flew as we young soldiers dodged and reloaded and fired again. It was a delightful little war that came to an end as so many wars do when resources dried up and the sun went down.

That evening there was a knock at our home door. Duane’s father greeted my father and I could tell it was not a happy conversation. I did what any good soldier does-I hunkered down in my bedroom---under the bed. I hid my stained shirt and rearranged other tell-tale evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066999/quotes>.

I could hear Duane's father---"*My boys and your boy managed to throw just about every berry in my berry patch. It is ruined. I spanked my boys real hard. I don't know what you will do but I SPANKED MY BOYS REAL HARD!!!!*"

The front door closed and my father called for me. He asked me what had happened and I told him most of the whole story. I knew I was in serious trouble. Then my father told me how DISAPPOINTED HE WAS IN ME. He went on to say, "*I am not going to punish you. I just hope you have learned a lesson that you will respect other people's property.*"

I could not believe what had just happened! I did not have to pay for the damage---nor was I even grounded. I did have to live with my own conscience and as you can see from this illustration it stuck with me. Yet, here was grace---pure grace and mercy for me---undeserving that I was.

This is the kind of grace we receive from God. In fact John goes on to say that Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to "save" or heal the world through him. John would say that we bring our own condemnation upon ourselves when we reject the light. It is not condemnation that God visits on us as punishment---it is just that the universe operates one way and when we choose darkness we have to live with the consequences.

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As I alluded to earlier this is quite a contrast to the way that the world operates and the way many churches teach. Judgment is alive and well today.

In truth we analyze, compare, evaluate, rate, and judge more today than ever before. Everything is a competition---or at least seems that way---with winners and losers. In the church there is a lot of talk---and a lot of movies---and a lot of books depicting God as more like Dirty Harry than John's Jesus.

Grace implies a basic trust. There is a paradox to grace. We can receive the grace and then run. We can accept the grace of God and then just go on doing what we have always been doing. Or the act of grace---as with my father--can challenge us to live differently. Duane and I and his brother never again had another berry fight and I learned to be more respectful of other peoples space.

Grace is being paid for a job before we do the job. We can take the money and run or we can learn to be the person we can be---a person of integrity, a person of love, and a person of grace.

-4-

The word in Greek translated by "love" is the Greek word "**agape**".  
**Agape most often refers to a love that is given with no expectation of return. This is the kind of love God shares.**

In contrast much of our love has expectations attached to the action. We love so that we will be loved in return or we love to receive something in return. It is that act of rare, selfless love that catches our attention. Parents often love their children with a love that transcends disappointments and hurts. We often love our spouses and partners in life the same way.

John declares that God has this kind of selfless love for the whole world. Please note that there are no conditions on this love. This is not a love for the RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE, THE PEOPLE WITH THE RIGHT KIND OF THEOLOGY, nor is it a love for only the RIGHT GROUPS. The Christ is not the possession of any church, any culture, or any nation.

In a recent book by Desmond Tutu he writes,

***“Look at South Africa! God does have a sense of humor. Who in their right minds could have ever imagined South Africa to be an example of anything but the most ghastly awfulness, of how not to order a nation’s race relations and governance? We South Africans were the unlikeliest lot and that is precisely why God has chosen us. We cannot really claim much credit ourselves for what we have achieved. We were doomed to perdition and were plucked out of total annihilation. We were a hopeless case if there ever was one. God intends that others might look at us and take courage. God wants to point to us as a possible beacon of hope, a possible paradigm, and to say, ‘Look at South Africa. They had a nightmare called apartheid. It has ended. Northern Ireland (or whatever) your nightmare will end too. They had a problem regarded as intractable. They are resolving it. No problem anywhere can ever be considered intractable. There is hope for you too,’ says God.”***

***Tutu continues:***

***“Our experiment is going to succeed because God wants us to succeed, not for our own glory and aggrandizement but for the sake of God’s world. God wants to show that there is life after conflict and repression---that because of forgiveness there is a future.”<sup>3</sup>***

There are countless examples of the working of God’s spirit within the world---loving---transforming---forgiving---and rebirthing.

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<sup>3</sup> Tutu, Desmond, No Future Without Forgiveness, (Image, 2000), p. 282.

This almost seems like an Easter story---right in the middle of Lent. For those who follow the liturgical calendar---and we do much of the time----the fourth Sunday of Lent is known as “Laetare Sunday”. It was a day to “lighten up” on the severity of the Lenten disciplines. It was a day of “grace”. So the texts for today move from penance to healing and restoration.

Even in the midst of our Lenten disciplines we need to realize that we have been invited here to celebrate the grace of God. **God loved the world so much—that God sent Jesus to be our light and to open us to love—true love---healthy love.**