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John 3:14-21

## DECONSTRUCTION

If you ever watch any of those home improvement shows on TV, or if you yourself have ever remodeled a part of your home, you will know that before a house can be restored to its former beauty, before a room can become functional again, it has to go through a period of deconstruction. Walls have to get torn down. Floors have to get pulled up. Cabinets have to be ripped out. Things get ugly for awhile.

That's what needs to happen to John 3:16. That much beloved Bible verse needs to go through a phase of deconstruction if we are to really see its beauty and reclaim its functionality. John 3:16 has been called, "the Gospel in a nutshell": *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Maybe you had to memorize it as a child. Or maybe you've seen it held up on signs at football games. It is a much loved passage. And it is also a very problematic passage with a troubling history. This passage has been used to divide people into categories: those who are saved and those who are damned. It has been used to draw a circle around those insiders who believe, and to pass judgment against those outsiders who don't believe. It has been waved around like a threat against those who do not believe that Jesus was God's son. And thus, John 3:16 has become something kind of scary and mean-spirited--and the deep theme of love that undergirds this passage has been lost and forgotten amid all the judgment.

It is time to do some deconstruction on this beloved but troubling passage. Just as when doing a home renovation, you cannot look at any one part of the house in isolation from the rest of the structure, because it's all connected, the same is true when looking at a passage in the

Bible. The trouble with John 3:16 is that it is often lifted up out of context, read in isolation from what surrounds it. But this verse is part of a larger structure and is connected to what comes before it and to what comes after it. So we need to take a look at these to better understand John 3:16.

And one part of the broader structure is the sentence Jesus utters right before he says, *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* In the sentence that comes right before this, Jesus says, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." This sentence refers to a story found in the book of Numbers, which we also read today. It's an odd story about when the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness after escaping slavery but before they found the Promised Land. And one of the hardships they encountered were these venomous snakes that would bite them and kill them. So God tells Moses to put a snake on a stick and to lift up the stick. And then anyone who had been bitten by a snake could look at the serpent on the stick and would be saved. And Jesus draws a parallel to this story. Jesus says that in a similar way the Son of God will be lifted up--as we know, on the cross--and those who look upon him, those who believe in him, will be saved. In other words, the parallel Jesus is conveying is that similar to those ancient Hebrews, there is venom flowing through our veins, a poison that is making us sick, threatening our lives. And Jesus offers us a way back to health and life.

It is important for us to consider just who Jesus is talking to when he is speaking about venom running through our veins and our need for saving. This entire passage is about a conversation Jesus has with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews--both of which make him a man of power, prestige, and prominence. He was both a

religious leader as well as a member of the Jewish governmental council. We might recall that Jesus was often critical of such leaders because of the ways they used their power, and the ways they were sometimes narrow-minded in enforcing the religious laws even when that burdened the poor and sick, and for their greed. We are told that Nicodemus comes to see Jesus under the cover of darkness--he doesn't want his colleagues to see him talking with Jesus. It seems that Nicodemus lacked the courage of his convictions, not unlike many of our national leaders and lawmakers today who are too afraid to break with their party line, to stand up and speak out against narrow-mindedness, or policies that will hurt the vulnerable. And so lacking what we might call a spine, Nicodemus comes creeping around after dark to have a conversation with Jesus. And Jesus has this whole conversation with Nicodemus about being born from above, from the Spirit, and he alludes to the story about the snakes infecting people with venom, and how Jesus himself offers a way to know eternal life. He says all these things to Nicodemus, but what I hear in all that is a challenge to Nicodemus. I hear Jesus saying, "Nick, are you really happy with your life lived in the dark? The poisons of power and greed and influence have infected you and they are making you sick. But there is another way. A light has come into the world. So come out of the darkness and live in the light."

Our beloved passage of John 3:16 is uttered in the midst of this one-on-one conversation with Nicodemus, uttered to a man who lived in more than one way in the darkness, who was infected with venoms that were making him sick, soul-sick. And he is offered a way to know life. And you and I who are allowed to listen in on that conversation are then prompted to imagine that Jesus is having that conversation with each of us. What venoms infect our hearts and souls and minds and make us sick? How do the ways we use our money, or treat other people, or harbor anger, or refuse to forgive, or live apathetic lives failing to use our gifts and

talents, or live over-indulgent lives, how do these kinds of choices keep us living in the darkness? Jesus ends his conversation with Nicodemus by saying, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." And so it *is* true that judgment *is* a component of the broader context of John 3:16--there *is* judgment in this passage. But rather than judgment of who is saved and who is damned, this broader passage summons us to undertake a self-judgment. We have been shown the light. We have been shown the way of Jesus. But do we live in the light or do we choose to remain in the dark? Instead of judging others, this passage calls us to judge ourselves.

Nevertheless, judgment is not at the core of John 3:16. Those people who use John 3:16 to pass judgment on others who don't believe in Jesus have failed to recall the very next verse: John 3:17, which states, *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* God's deep love for the entire world is what lies at the center of our passage. God desires to save the world and to lead us out of the darkness we make for ourselves, and the darkness that comes with pain and loss and heartache, and to lead us into the light. There are no insiders and outsiders. Rather, when we look at this passage we learn that everyone is included in God's saving love.

BUT . . . some will argue, BUT it says right there you have to *believe* in order to be saved. You have to believe in Jesus.

Now we are getting to the meat of what has been so problematic with this passage. Belief. What really do we mean when we talk about belief in Jesus? In order to be saved, do we simply have to say, "I believe in Jesus?" or to utter those words, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior," like it is some kind of magic formula? Is that really what the Christian faith is reduced to: a magic formula of words? We treat belief in Jesus like it is some kind of golden ticket into

heaven. Do you remember the movie, *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*? In that story, Willie Wonka inserted a few golden tickets inside random chocolate bars and the children who found these golden tickets could get a VIP tour of his chocolate factory. That's sometimes how Christians have used belief in Jesus: our golden ticket into the afterlife.

Belief *is* an important theme for the writer of John's Gospel, but it is never as simplistic as uttering those magic words, "I believe in Jesus." Instead, belief in John's gospel is far more complex. Jesus in John's gospel talks about being the vine and we as the branches must abide in the vine and must bear fruit. Jesus in John's gospel says that if we love him we will keep his commandments especially his commandment to love. So belief seems to be connected to abiding in Jesus and following Jesus in the way he has demonstrated: a way of love. Belief then is tied to discipleship--what we do and say and how we act.

According to John 3:16, it is this belief that will give us eternal life. You have to believe in Jesus in order to get eternal life. Eternal life is the prize. But what do we mean by eternal life? For a great many Christians it has meant getting into heaven, the afterlife. Heaven becomes the ultimate destination. But then you look at the gospels, all four of them--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John--and the amount of material that is devoted to the afterlife is miniscule compared to the vast amounts of time Jesus spends talking about life right here and now--and how we live with one another, and how we care about one another, and how we can feel loved and valued by God right here and now even though we are also really messed up people. Jesus even says, "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." And we begin to wonder if Jesus had something broader in mind when he talked about *eternal life*.

I propose that what Jesus had in mind when he spoke about eternal life did not only include heaven but also something else. I propose that Jesus meant for eternal life to be known

right here and right now. William Sloan Coffin, the writer and pastor, wrote that "Eternal life refers to a kind of life, not its length." He added, "Length is not the most important dimension. Here on earth it may be a long life; it may be a short one. The point is, the world can't destroy eternal life."

Think about that. What if eternal life can be known right now. The world can't destroy eternal life because it is rooted in the love of God. You can know hardships. You can know suffering. You can mess up and make mistakes. But the world can't destroy eternal life. Jesus offers us a kind of life and a way of living in this world that can't be destroyed. Wouldn't it be ironic if we died and showed up at the pearly gates eager for our prize of eternal life only to have God say to us, "You just missed it. Eternal life was back there when you were alive."

Let me ask you this question: What is your ultimate destination in life? Where are you trying to go or achieve? What is your ultimate destination? Some in this world would say their ultimate destination is to make money, have fun, enjoy themselves. Some in this world would say their ultimate destination is to get into heaven. And both of them would have missed out on the eternal life Jesus makes possible.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* It's time to deconstruct John 3:16 from how it has been used and abused. Let's jettison the judgment that has for too long been connected with John 3:16. Let's tear out the tendency to use John 3:16 to draw divisions between who is saved and who isn't. Let's toss aside the assumption that eternal life is just about getting into heaven. And let us instead reconstruct a foundation of meaning from John 3:16 that declares God's love for every single one of us. From John 3:16 we can construct a faith in which God responds to the venoms that threaten all of us by gifting us with a special kind of life: eternal life, a life known and found in the way of love, the way of Jesus Christ. Now, you and I can build something lasting upon that.