

God's Perfect Love

Sometimes a verse in the Bible can be so familiar that we read it or recite it without giving it much thought. It's not that it's not meaningful. In fact, it's usually very well known precisely because it is so meaningful. What can happen though is that the depth of meaning or the nuances contained within it may be obscured or lost if our recitation or memorization is merely rote and repeated.

Such may be the case with one of the verses contained in the part of John's gospel that I just read—John 3:16. "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."

This verse is indeed worthy of being in the top ten verses of the Bible to memorize because it is such a concise summary statement of who and what Jesus is. In just 27 words, we read of God's love, of God's intention for us, and why Jesus is at the center of the story.

And of course, for us in this congregation where we are continuing our focus on Learning and Living God's Love, Together, this verse that emphasizes God's incredible abundant love is at the top of the list of supporting scriptures.

Today, in the midst of the season of Lent, where we are focusing on the journey to the cross of Good Friday on which Jesus died, as well as the empty cross of Easter morning from which Jesus rose, we're exploring that sacrificial love of Jesus, who died and rose to new life.

Because the good news of Easter, that we'll be celebrating in 3 weeks, is that not only is Jesus raised from the dead to new life, but so it is for us as Christians, it is fitting that we take a little time during this period of preparation to examine some of the nuances in this prominent verse of scripture.

The particular nuance that I want to explore this morning is what John is talking about when he says ". . . everyone who *believes* in him. . . " "That everyone who *believes* in him may not perish but may have eternal life." What is he talking about when he says "believes in him"?

On first glance, the word "believe" would seem to be pretty straightforward. Believing means to have no doubt. In this case have no doubt about who Jesus is, namely the Son of God, given by God, to the world. To believe in Jesus is to assert with confidence that Jesus is the son of God. And from this certainty and lack of doubt we can build all sorts of implications of what it means for us and for the world.

Believing in Jesus is central to what it means to be a Christian to this day. When one is baptized, he or she is asked to assert who is the Lord and Savior of the one being baptized. The answer, of course, is Jesus Christ. It is our declaration of faith, our assertion of certainty, that without a doubt, Jesus is my Savior and Lord in whom I put my trust and faith.

It is this central assertion that binds Christians from across many denominations and traditions together in this unity of belief. This unity across the theological and ecclesiastical spectrums is a very beautiful manifestation of God's love for the world. If only this central belief that is universally shared by all Christians could lead us beyond the divisions that separate us from one another on so many other biblical and theological matters. I'll save that which separates us for another day. Today, I want to take a closer and deeper look at what it means to believe.

It turns out that in the community in which this gospel of John was written, believing is much more than asserting something or expressing a lack of doubt. Seminary professor W. Hulitt Gloer suggests that there is much more to it. He writes, "In John, 'believe' is always an action verb. It is something you do, and it must not be reduced to merely giving cognitive affirmation to certain propositions (e.g., that Jesus is the Son of God, that he was raised from the dead). While such affirmations are involved in believing, for John believing is much more than this. . . . For John, the opposite of belief is not unbelief but disobedience. To believe, therefore, is to obey!" (*Feasting on the Word: preaching the revised common lectionary, Year B, Vol. 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2008 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 119)

To believe is to obey. And to believe is to do.

If therefore believing is doing, then there is a lot of action involved where belief exists. When this understanding is lived out, the Christian community is not only a community of shared convictions but it is also a community of shared action.

During the recent spring break week, I was part of a group of 11 people from our Presby Cats college ministry who traveled to Baton Rouge, Louisiana for a week long mission trip arranged through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. This Presby Cats mission trip was the first of three mission trips that are emanating from our congregation in 2019. At the end of May, our adult mission trip will head to northeast Montana to do some work on the Fort Peck Reservation. And then at the end of July, members of our youth group will travel to San Diego, California for a week of mission work. Mission trips like these, are intensive events in which there is a lot of time devoted to doing the work of faith, to doing the work of belief, that in turn bolsters our faith as well as the faith of others.

Next Sunday, our Presby Cats will be leading both morning worship services here. Those who were part of this mission trip will be sharing some of their observations of the church and community during their week in Louisiana. You'll be hearing a lot about faith in action and specifically about how belief is lived out.

Having had the privilege of accompanying our students on this trip to Louisiana, I want to share a couple of observations that I made of belief lived out.

The first has to do with the Presbyterian church that hosted us for the week—University Presbyterian Church in Baton Rouge. This is a church that is somewhat like our church here in Bozeman. It is situated adjacent to Louisiana State University, the land grant state university.

When disaster hit the Baton Rouge area in 2016 with a cataclysmic rain storm where a major tropical depression camped out over the area for several days, the flooding that resulted was unprecedented, causing severe damage to over 150,000 area homes. You'll be hearing more details about the results of that storm next week.

University Presbyterian Church responded to this disaster by opening its doors to host teams of volunteers who were coming to Baton Rouge at the behest of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to aid in the overwhelming need. Because there were so many volunteers coming, the church leadership decided to transform a section of the church building from what began as temporary housing for these teams of volunteer relief workers, to a permanent set up for groups that would be coming for the foreseeable future. Three Sunday school rooms were converted into comfortable dorm-style rooms with bunk beds to sleep up to 20 people at a time. Another room was converted into a full bathroom, complete with a shower. A system was set up for the provision of linens and towels for work groups. A special kitchen was constructed that was outfitted with everything a group would need to prepare

meals while in the church. And most importantly of all, a team of volunteers was formed to serve as hosts for visiting groups to assure that all of their needs are met.

This was the facility in which we stayed during our week in Louisiana. In talking with a number of the church volunteers, they shared with us that the church leadership decided to make this dormitory arrangement permanent, because they knew that it was not a matter of if there is another storm, but rather when there is another storm, the need for rebuilding in south Louisiana will be an ongoing need for the foreseeable future. For University Presbyterian Church, to believe in Jesus is to actively engage with the meeting of needs in its community.

The second example of belief lived out that we observed during our mission trip has to do with the organization for whom we worked during the week—Rebuilding Together Baton Rouge. This is the local organization that Presbyterian Disaster Assistance partners with in responding to the needs resulting from this natural disaster.

Prior to this storm in August 2016, Rebuilding Together Baton Rouge, RTBR for short, was an organization that had existed for many years that provided needed service to 3 groups of people in the area: the elderly, the disabled, and to veterans. The needs that were met were primarily around building handicapped ramps and installing grab bars in bathrooms and homes to make them safer for the residents. The work was done by area volunteers who provided the labor for these projects.

When the disastrous storm hit in August 2016, the needs of the community exploded way beyond these basic services that RTBR had been providing. The board of directors of RTBR decided that even though they had previously been equipped for retrofitting, the need for disaster response would now be added to its service. It took some time, and it took the addition of a whole host of new skills, but RTBR rose to the challenge and is doing the work of rebuilding, one home at a time.

It was inspiring to hear the chairperson of the RTBR board share her conviction that RTBR had risen to the challenge and is continuing to carry out this ministry today and will continue to do so in the years to come.

Both University Presbyterian Church and Rebuilding Together Baton Rouge are inspiring in how their belief is lived out in such tangible and visible action.

“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.” Our own mission trip experience enabled us to see this belief in Jesus lived out in Baton Rouge. And as we saw it and observed it, we were also inspired to live it out as well as was put our belief into action.

This winter, our adult Sunday school class has been engaged in a Bible study based on a book named *The Verse After the Verse* by Presbyterian Pastor Doc Shear (© 2018). Each week we have focused on a particular Bible verse that is often familiar, and after talking about it, we look at the verse that follows for additional insight. The very first verse we studied was John 3:16, which I have focused on this morning. I want to end with the verse after the verse by reading verse 17. “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.”

My friends, when we understand belief as an action word that implies tangible action, we as Christians are people of action. But not just any action, and certainly not action for action’s sake alone. The action called for in the verse after the verse is action that leads to the world being saved, being made right, being restored and reconciled. May our action do just that as our belief in Jesus Christ impels us forward.