

“You Can Run, But You Cannot Hide!”

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FCMF #1

Scriptures: Psalms 139 and John 3:16-17

Psalms 139 :1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

John 3:16 "This is how God loved the world: God gave up an only Son, so everyone who believes in him can have real life. 17 After all, God sent this Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to rescue the world through him.

John 3:16 is certainly a very familiar verse

so much so that even many non-Christians know it by heart.

You see it in a number of places,

graffiti on a bridge over the highway or on the side of a building.

Even at football games, prominently held up in the end zone

so the cameras can catch it during a field goal!

(Hold up sign)

For many of us it was likely the first verse

we had to memorize as a child.

And it is important, a central belief for Christians.

You could call it a one sentence summary of what Christians believe.

That God so loves the world, an entire world

that also includes all plants, rocks and critters,

and us, so much that God was willing to prove this love

by taking on human flesh, recklessly willing to risk humiliation,

persecution and death at the hands of some of these creatures.

And God did all this in order to save the world

and to give that humanity who had rejected God a second chance!

This is God's "final solution," for this troubled old world.

This is God's answer that what had been created good
was not a mistake, but indeed worth it and worth saving.
You and me, aren't a whole lot different than
those old coke bottles I used to collect along the highways as a kid
and turned into the grocery store for a nickel,
God thinks we too are redeemable and reusable.
But God's solution is love, costly, suffering love.
And that is what in the end, wins! Love.
This is certainly a simple truth we need to know
and experience and it is certainly worth the time to memorize.

But as important as John 3:16 is,
I think that John 3:17 is just as profound
and as important, "Simple Truth!"
But how many of you also memorized it as a kid?
How many of you quote it right along with verse 16?
And why do so many Christians seem to get it wrong?
How come so often many churchgoers act as if verse 17
had nothing to do with the Bible or Jesus or God's wondrous love?
I mean how more clear can it be,
how could it be any more simple?
God comes into our world in a great act of love,
that is only love with no condemnation!

Do most just simply stop after verse 16
and forget that anything like verse 17 follows?
Maybe we simply take it for granted?
"Of course there is no condemnation in love!" we say.
Unfortunately in my experience many Christians do not keep
the two verses together and actually do the exact opposite.
As if one verse was in Genesis and the other in Revelations!
So far apart are many who interpret it.
What I frankly hear too much of from many Christians
is that God does not love everyone and actually
that God condemns a whole lot of folks.
I hear this a lot in my own beloved Mennonite denomination.
And some folks have a really long list
of those deserving condemnation,
Gays, enemies, terrorists, non-Christians, poor people,
murderers, thieves, immigrants and etc, etc, etc.
So many churches, even a few that I have been a part of,
say they believe that God's love is unconditional,
but then seemingly without a thought

turn around and place plenty of conditions on God's Love!?
God's love, is really only for those who believe certain things about God
or that God's love is only for those who follow certain rules
or that God's love is only for our select group,
who belong to the one and only correct church.

Now do not get me wrong, I do think belief and behavior are important.
As most Mennonites would say they are an indication of one's
sincere attempt to follow Jesus as a changed person.

But too often churches, especially Mennonite ones',
use these in manipulative ways, actually using
the fear of condemnation to coerce people.

But doesn't the Bible also say somewhere,
"...that perfect love casts out fear"!?

I've met far too many folks who live in fear rather than faith.

I have met far too many who feel that they are condemned
by God rather than loved by God!

And I must be honest here, and this makes me really, really angry!

Far too many folks have been told
that they are not good enough to be loved by God.

I have met lots of folks who have been told that God will condemn them
for who they are or for something they have done.

Again I have preached a number of times on the fact
that we do reap sometimes both intended and unintended
consequences of our choices.

But none of our mistakes alter the fundamental lens
through which God see each and every one of us
and that is an aperture of pure unconditional L O V E!

God, my friends, does not gleefully punish us,
pricking us as if we are some kind of Voodoo doll!

Such a view of God is inconsistent
with both verses 16 and 17 of John 3,

But just an unfortunate view seems to pervade many churches
and it seems to give some Christians the God awful
permission to act in unloving ways!

We condemn rather than accept,
we with hold our love rather than share our support,
and we exclude folks whom we see as out side of God's love.

Sorry if I'm bumming you all out this morning?

I will try to end this on a bit more of a positive note
But I have met far too many people in my lifetime

who desperately want and need to know that God loves them,
but who have instead been so beat up
by so called "good Christian soldiers" that they just can't
believe anymore that such a God exists!
They have been told that, "God loves them, but..."
"God loves you," they have been told,
"but first you need to do X,Y or Z!"
That my friends, does not meet my definition of unconditional!
And that is also not what verse 17 says.
And that is why, for me, verse 17 may actually be
more important than John 3:16!?
It is why I will not separate the two.
It is why I want to be clear and "right as rain,"
with everyone I happen to meet.
Call it an evangelistic fervor if you want, but I want folks to know
the simple truth that God's love does not condemn us!

The relationship that the Devine Creator wants with us
is based upon love and not fear!

And so if I only get one simple truth,
just one verse to paint on a sign
and to hold up in the end zone, right behind the uprights,
in full view of the TV cameras, at the next Super Bowl.
My little sign is gonna say John 3:17!
(hold up your other sign)