

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When I was growing up, professional wrestling was more popular than it ever had been and likely ever will be. And one of the most notable figures of what is known as the attitude era was Stone Cold Steve Austin. Austin was a wrestler who was known for being tough, brash, a little off-color, and for downing choice adult beverages (in a great spray of foam) every time he entered the ring. He was also known for being a fantastic talker, and one of the lasting moments of his time in professional wrestling was when he dissected a big victory he had just won by stating that “Austin 3:16 says I just whooped you.” Within days, Austin 3:16 was made into a t-shirt, and is regarded as one of the top selling items of professional wrestling merchandise of all time. This line, something that he made up on the fly the night he said it, played off of what is perhaps the most famous bible book, chapter, and verse citation, John 3:16. Austin would go on later in life to reflect that he was inspired by seeing signs from football games. Anytime there was a touchdown or field goal, the camera would cut to someone with a John 3:16 sign, and that coupled with his opponents religious-themed words directed at him earlier that night, inspired him to play off this famous verse, hitting a “grand slam” for catch-phrases as he would later describe it.

Austin was able to resonate so deeply and so quickly with his audience because he was playing off of something that was instantly recognizable, something that already resonated deeply, something that was more famous than anything he might say (although he gave it a good run). And, this is a verse we have before us today. 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.” There’s a good reason that this verse is so famous, that it has come to stand as the catch-all of Christianity. It distills into one line the promise we have with God through Christ, and begins to draw out the reason for this promise. But, it isn’t everything that’s in the Bible, let alone the Gospels, for good reason. It plays a particular part, a particular role in helping shape our understanding of our faith, but it isn’t everything, in fact, it isn’t everything even in this very chapter.

It’s important that when we hold up verses like John 3:16, we remember the context that surrounds them, and even the potential controversy over their attribution.

John 3:16 comes in the middle of a chapter where Jesus is discussing with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, who will play an important role in this story still to come. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of night, because Nicodemus sees something in Jesus, recognizes a real teacher, and perhaps something more. It is their conversation that provides the framework for understanding this line in John 3:16. And I want to dig into this conversation, especially the first couple of verses we have today, how this statement shines light on John 3:16, but it’s important to make one note about today’s pericope, that is the section of scripture we’ve been given to read today.

Not all scholars agree that Jesus says the line in John 3:16. And, I’m not saying that the Jesus Seminar doesn’t believe Jesus said this line, because they don’t believe Jesus actually said much of anything. A number of biblical scholars from many different schools of thought question whether the attribution of verses 16-21 should be Jesus

speaking, or rather are the words of John, not intended to be attributed to Jesus at all (one of the problems of reading a dead language, it's hard to agree on punctuation). It's important to make this note because I do think it changes our understanding of the line if it is attributed to the words of Jesus (which in some Bibles appear in red for the reader's help) versus the distillation of Jesus' life and mission as understood by John. I don't think the attribution changes the impact of the line, but it is important to note that not everyone agrees Jesus should be attributed this line himself (at least as far as anything in John can accurately be directly attributed).

So, what does this line mean for us anyways, "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." I think the real impact of this line comes from reading the conversation that Jesus is having with Nicodemus that leads to this line, in particular verses 14 and 15, wherein Jesus directly refers to himself as a snake.

Jesus likes to subvert expectations in conversation. The story he is referencing with Moses comes to us from Numbers 21:9. The people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, had begun to lose their faith, had begun to lash out at Moses and his leadership, had begun to lash out at God. And then, they began to fall prey to snakes that bit with fury, a wound that burned like fire, before death eventually came. The people appealed to Moses, to God, to save them from this plague. And Moses lifted up a bronze serpent, and "whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." This was healing offered through faith. There was no further

requirement to live, only to look. There was no ceremonial washing, no medicine to take, no offering to give, all one had to do was simply look, and they would live.

And, as Jesus shares with Nicodemus, so too will the Son of God be lifted up, to heal, if we are willing to simply look.

There is a great play on words here in John. This phrase of lifted up is both literal and figurative. Jesus will literally be lifted up upon the cross to fulfill his destiny, to save us from sin, to heal us from death. Jesus is figuratively lifted up through the praise and honor we bestow. And, the cross still stands before us, lifted high, for us to look upon and be healed.

This context from which we then read John 3:16 makes this verse stand out so much more to me. This verse is not simply a line to distill our entire faith, but rather a small piece of a greater chapter wherein the challenge of our faith is laid out, the fact that our healing is present if we simply look up at it (seriously, that's all there is to it, but how hard is it sometimes to change our gaze?), and where the challenge of Jesus' presence in this world is further extrapolated in terms of light and dark.

John 3:19 states "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

I mean, come on.

That is the distillation of our experience of the promise of faith in one line if I ever saw it. The light is here in the world, but the people loved darkness rather than light. The people loved darkness so the fact that God so loved the world, doesn't mean much, if they aren't willing to let that light in. The challenge of our faith is not to shield our eyes

from the light. The challenge of our faith is not to stay in the shadows, in the dark, ignoring the clarity that comes with the light. The challenge of our faith is to look directly into that light and be healed.

The bright light of Christ emanates all around us. From the candles we keep lit throughout the entire year, the cross we process through this place, the colors refracted through the stained glass, Christ is present in very real, tangible ways here. The bright light of Christ is also present in the peace you share with your neighbors, even more so when you learn your neighbor's name and share your own, when you reach out to be more than pew neighbors and strive to become actual neighbors who know something about each other. The bright light of Christ is present outside these walls, in friends and family sure, but also in people you meet on the street, in homeless people, in drug addicts, in your coworker you can't stand, and the one you always ignore because they aren't important enough for your time of day. The challenge of our faith, the challenge of accepting John 3:16 as the reality of our faith, is to look into that bright light of Christ, and be healed by its presence, both here in this building, and in every beloved person (which is every person) in God's creation.

Austin 3:16 was a moment in one man's entertainment career that came in many ways to define him, but it wasn't the full picture of the Texas Rattlesnake. The same is true of John 3:16. It is perhaps the most famous Bible verse, but it isn't everything, in fact it isn't even that important without the context that surrounds it, for we can't simply hold up this line as the distillation of our faith, without also reading what comes before and after this line.

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ is the proof that God loves the world, but it is up to us to look upon that light to be healed from the dark of this world.

Amen.