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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mt. Pleasant
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Lent IV
John 3:14-21

You've probably seen them.

Roadside signs, lawn signs.

No, they don't say "Obama-Biden" or "McCain-Palin" anymore.

They've been around for several years.

"John 3:16."

Have any of you ever pulled over, taken out your Blackberry, Googled John 3:16 just to find out who the heck this John is running for some sort of weird office? Is 3:16 the voting day?

I saw one the other day on one of my monthly drives to Grand Rapids. There's a nice new Methodist church somewhere along M-46 Westbound toward 131. Out near the road is a spanking-new electronic sign. It usually gives the weather, the date, and the time of choir practice. But one day it also flashed John 3:16. John 3:16. John 3:16.

Alright, alright, *I get it!*

John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him will not die, but have eternal life.

Now – for all of you who were embarrassed thinking you were the only person in the world who didn't know what John 3:16 stands for: Now you know.

You're welcome.

And now that we have *that* out of the way, I want to know:

What about the *rest* of the world?!? What about the 1.5 billion Muslims? The 900 million Hindus? The 376 million Buddhists? Fourteen million people of Jewish faith?

Here's a chart – I realize it may be difficult for some of you to see, but I'll tell you that the green represents Christianity: 33% of religious adherents in the world. Red is Islam. Pale blue Hindu. Thirty-three percent: That leaves 66% of the world out in the cold. Cast out into the darkness. That's a whole lot of people that God doesn't love very much, isn't it.

Or is it?

There's an interesting website put out by the U.S. Census Bureau. It is a constantly changing display of the American and world population. It's downright scary. Anyway, as I was writing this, the world population stood at 6,768,149,004. The religious statistics I've just reported would indicate that approximately 2,233,489,171 of those good people are Christians. That means that 4,466,978,342 people had better find Jesus if they want eternal life.

Does God really consider those four-billion-plus people his throwaways?

I can't believe it.

Moreover, what about Abraham, Moses, Sarah, Ruth, Jacob, Isaac, Naomi, Esther? And all their people! What about them? They didn't have a chance to even *know* Jesus.

John 3:16. It says so right there.

And then later on in the Gospel of our Patron Saint, Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32) *All people.* Not thirty-three percent, but *all people.*

So come on, Jesus, which is it going to be? Thirty-three percent or one hundred percent?!?

Maybe Jesus just said 3:16 to scare the pants off Nicodemus. Or you. Or me.

Here's what I think.

I think that St. John the Evangelist is pointing us to the free gift of God's love. "God *gave* his only Son." Not "God *sent* his only Son," but "God *gave* his only Son."

You who are parents: Imagine giving up your child.

In the economy of the Holy Trinity, what God is doing is giving him*self* to the world. Not that the world asked for it, not that the world needed it (though we did), not that the world would even say "thank you."

God simply did it. *Gave his only Son.* A free gift.

Because the world is broken.

The great playwright Eugene O'Neill said, "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue." And I would add: The glue of God is love.

And I have *another* question: What is this eternal life Jesus is talking about? Does it mean living forever? If it does, then there's a lot of believers who got gypped. Does it mean going to heaven? It surely means more than being alive forever, because our limited imagination can't

even grasp the meaning of forever. Perhaps eternal life is something closer to life outside time – which might make our eternal life something like the life of God. A return to God time.

By enacting his forgiving grace, God gives humankind the ultimate outpouring of love – generosity in the face of Jesus Christ.

And I cannot believe that such generosity is limited to thirty-three percent of the world's population.

There you have it: I'm a Universalist. Not a Unitarian, mind you, for I am firmly Trinitarian – but for me, the God who is Love does not hand out report cards: "You're a Christian. Enter heaven." "You're a Buddhist. Go somewhere else."

It's not like heaven is supposed to be a gated community.

And by the way, I think the Bishop knows this already.

For me, *for me*, Jesus Christ provides a unique pathway to the divine. For me, Jesus is the unique child of God. For me, Jesus is the unique gift of God.

But I'm not sure about the requirement that people *believe* in Jesus in order to have eternal life with God.

Heck, I'm not even a hundred percent sure what eternal life *is*. I just know that it is a promise.

And God doesn't make promises God doesn't intend to keep.

And so, though, there are things for us to consider when we hear this Gospel passage.

First, we need to remember that Jesus didn't write it. John did. And John wrote it anywhere from the year 60 to the year 140, depending on which scholar you believe. He was not an eyewitness reporter.

Second, it was written in Greek. There were no punctuation marks – that is, no quotation marks. So inserting "Jesus said" may or may not be questionable. Putting quotation remarks around John 3:16 may or may not be questionable. My point here is that in the theology of John, God's astonishing generosity is fundamental. To attribute this saying to Jesus supports John's theology of Jesus Christ as the outpouring of God's love for all humankind.

Third, John writes quite a bit about eternal life. If this is the same John who wrote the book of Revelation, he was a Christ-following mystic. Mystics have a certain style, a certain flair for metaphor and symbolism. Eternal life was very real to John – and it is very real to me, too; I just don't know what it is.

Fourth, and probably most important, we must return to the message of God's gift. God *gave* Jesus into the world. God *birthed* Jesus through our sister Mary. God didn't have to have a reason that made any sense to you or me – he just loved us that much.

And he still loves us that much.

Believe in Jesus. Believe in God. Believe in Love, which conquers all the darkness of the world and brings us all into eternal light.

Amen.