

Sunday, March 14, 2021
From Pastor Mary Gay McKinney

Grace to you and peace from God our creator and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Thank you for the privilege of sharing a message this morning.

John 3:16 is a verse that many of us memorized at some point along the way. Along with Psalm 23, it was important to the people in my church family that children know these passages. Once when a missionary came to visit our church to share about his work on the mission field he spoke of the importance of memorizing scripture. He said we never know when we won't have our Bibles or when someone might take them away. The more that we have memorized the stronger we will be in times of challenge or adversity. The more help we can be for those who need us. Here's John 3:16, the King James version:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

As a young child, and even as I grew older, I didn't have too many questions about this verse. Lately, because it is so precious, it seems a good idea to look more closely. One of the more common ways it is taught is as a contract that goes like this. If you believe certain things about Jesus then you are fulfilling your part of the contract. God's part of the contract is to make sure that you live eternally after death in heaven with God and loved ones. That's what many of us learned.

Let's take a second look. When we see the word **believe** what do we mean by that? What does it mean to believe someone or to believe in someone? When someone tells us a story or maybe a fish tale, as we call it, can we believe them? Perhaps they were out fishing and they caught a fish from the deep sea that weighs 55 lb. Knowing the stories they tell, do we believe the fish actually weighed 55 lb? Belief involves trusting that the person is telling us the truth. We look at their history with truth-telling. If we have a family member who always tells the truth when it comes to the length and weight of the fish they catch, we are inclined to believe them. If, on the other hand, they're known to stretch the truth when fishing and in other situations, we may not believe the fish really weighed 55 lb.

When Jesus began his public ministry he told stories. Jesus knew he had been sent by God to tell the truth no matter the cost. Stories are his way of revealing what God is really like. Another big part of his time with us involved healing. Jesus heals people of all sorts of physical and emotional diseases. Jesus wants us to know that God is a God who heals, who loves, who delivers, who rights wrongs. That's a different message from others in his day. The cultures nearby and indeed some of the religious leaders in his very own religion talk of a distant God; a God who is more like a scorekeeper watching us to call us out, maybe even punish us, when we make a mistake, do wrong.

Some of you may have participated in a Serendipity Bible workshop at some point. One exercise that I remember is when we are invited to think of our lives as a football game. We are asked what part are you playing, and what position does God play in your life? As people share around the table,

some think of themselves as the quarterback. Some had been through difficult times and feeling more like offensive linebackers, getting hit often. Some revealed that they see God as up in the press box keeping score. What if you saw God as a coach, the coach who believes in you and who wants you with your abilities on the team?

So what might it mean for us to believe in Jesus? First it could mean that we believe him, that he tells us the truth about who God is and what God wants. One of the more difficult parts of our relationship with Jesus is to believe in him. To believe in his way and in his truth means my life is going to change in how I live in the world. It feels, well, it is dangerous to do things the way Jesus does them ~ not retaliate, not go about trying to hurt people who hurt us, sharing what we have. What if we run out? And what if we do, what if we don't believe in him? He says that we could perish.

Throughout his ministry Jesus called us to a way of being in the world that would cause the world to thrive and in which we would thrive. What might it mean to perish? It might mean that life as we know it would cease to have meaning and purpose. One of my favorite book titles is "Believe in The God Who Believes in You". It's a book Robert Schuller wrote about the Ten Commandments many years ago. God has come to us to let us know in the midst of a chaotic and dangerous world God has hopes, high hopes, and plans for us and for our world. We grow in understanding that we have the capacity to weather storms to grow in the midst of chaos and in uncertainty, and to help others at the same time as they see how we live our lives.

Jesus gives us a blueprint for our own lives and a way to share with others. Think of it this way. If you were contracting with an architect to build a house, a tower, a commercial building, you would want to be sure the architect knew exactly what he was doing with his designs. Believing Jesus and believing in Jesus is our way of trusting the designs of God for our lives and the lives of others.

As our scripture says this morning Jesus came not to condemn the world, not to look at us and say these buildings must be condemned, but to look at us and say these buildings are part of the architect's design to rehab and make new.

As Jesus says, believe in God, believe also in me.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Benediction

The God of this world has brought you into this world to thrive, to be a blessing to others. Go forth into your day and into your week with this commission. Believe in God. Believe, also, in Jesus. And believe you are called. Amen.