

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

There is likely no passage in the New Testament as often quoted as John 3:16.

That may be in part because it has become part of popular culture. It's cited in music, it put on posters at American football games, but it's also one of the central themes of Christianity. It helps us not only appreciate the relationship between Jesus and God – the human manifestation of God on Earth – but also presents the promise that belief in the Son grants access to heaven – rebirth and eternal life.

A few years ago, an atheist friend of mine, asked me to be Godmother to her daughter. She had married into a Catholic family, and had agreed to have her daughter baptised. She was taking the matter seriously and, even though I wasn't her closest friend, she was asking ME to help her daughter in her faith journey.

I said I'd be happy to accept. And then I asked her “but why me?”

Her answer, much like our friendship, was frank “Because you are actually trying to live what you believe because you think it's the way to live – not because you think it's your key to heaven.”

As it turns out, my friend, with whom I have had few specific discussions with respect to religion felt it was creepy, disingenuous and frightening that some Christian behaviour was motivated by the concept in John 3:16.

I'm not going to lie: I don't think much about heaven. It comforts me when I think about death, it helps explain death to children but it doesn't find root in the consciousness in daily life.

I had never thought much about John 3:16 either. But the manner in which it has been popularized – out of the larger context of John’s Gospel is uncomfortable to me. What kind of people are we if we treat others with love and respect out of motivation for benefit in the after life??

When I speak to my children, I don’t tell them to be good in order to get into heaven. I tell them to treat people as they want to be treated; I tell them to choose to love others and to show love especially when it is difficult; I tell them that life is happier when you live in a world that embraces forgiveness – for others and for yourself.

- Even when your baby sister hits you, it is still not ok to hit her back, you have to help teach her not to hit and you have to forgive her for hitting;
- It’s not nice to call that boy weak when he says his backpack is heavy, maybe it is heavy, or maybe not, but you don’t call someone names, it hurts their feelings and makes them sad.

There is more to today’s Gospel than John 3:16.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

At first read, these additional passages don’t seem to stray from the message, but what strikes me is the reference to “whoever does not believe has already been condemned”.

Not that he *will* be condemned, in that he will not be rewarded with entry into heaven - but that he *is* already condemned – now.

Reflect on this in the context of your life. What has your faith brought to your life without which you would be condemned?

Mine comes to mind easily: Every night, after I crawl into bed and sigh my big end-of-day exhausted sigh, I say a prayer. No matter how wonderful or absolutely terrible that day has been, my prayer begins with “Thank you God, for this day.”

This day that has been difficult - or

This day that has been challenging - or

This day that has been beautiful - or

This day that has taught me something

This day, and every day, I see the beauty of creation, the wonder of the sacred. Amidst the frenzy of brushing the kids teeth every morning, commuting to work, the constant files, exercise, family meals, family laundry, work in the evening – somewhere in all of that I always find those moment of grace where I can see the living presence of God. Here. Now. In someone’s innovative idea, in my son’s thoughtfulness towards another, in a quiet summer morning...

My faith helps me see life differently, through the lens of hope and wonder.

So what brought you to this place today?

It would probably be easier for you to be at home right now. Spending time with your loved ones, maybe even getting that coveted “me time” everyone keeps talking about?

It’s easy NOT to come to church, so what is it that roused you up and through those doors? The music? The fellowship of other parishioners? The social justice works of the church? The

renewal you feel here? Would your life feel condemned without it?

How about God's ability to forgive you, and help you forgive yourself?

I believe that absent my faith, I would be condemned. Today. Now. And I suspect you do too, because otherwise I don't think you'd be here.

No matter our religion, the best way of life is to treat each other as we want to be treated and that was Jesus' message. Our actions are necessary to fulfill His teachings, but they are also a means to our daily salvation.

In harmony with today's reading from the second letter of St Paul to the Corinthians:

Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Today, may Jesus' grace brings us peace, the love of God and the fellowship Holy Spirit be with us in this place, and outside this place in this time. Now.