

SAVED!
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March 22, 2009
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

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When I was in high school I launched my own personal Billy Graham type crusade in order to save my classmates from eternal damnation. I often quoted John 3:16 to them. I was very sincere.

Later, I would learn that sincerity isn't everything. As Charlie Brown often lamented after losing yet another baseball game: *How can we lose when we're so sincere?!* Sincerity is not enough.

I was a child of a fundamentalist church. I was absolutely certain that anyone who was not a born-again, Bible-believing, washed-in-the-blood-of-the-lamb Christian was doomed to spend eternity in an actual place called Hell where they would suffer torment forever—unquenchable flames, utter darkness, gnashing of teeth, relentless wailing, maggots, foul smells, and certainly no baseball, peanuts or cracker jacks. In a word: Hell.

Now, if you really, really believe such a thing—as I did!—and don't try to spare your friends, what kind of person would you be? I often felt guilty for not doing enough to save my high school friends from Hell. I considered Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and just about any other so-called "Christian" (not to mention Jews and Muslims) doomed. Fortunately, my zealotry was restrained by my desire to be cool and have friends. God saved a lot of my classmates *from me!*

Many years later I would discover that "salvation," as well as "heaven and hell" as portrayed in the Bible, have next to nothing to do with the so-called hereafter and everything to do with here and now. The popular notions of heaven and hell so prevalent in much of Christianity (and Islam) were inspired and enflamed, not by the Bible, but by the likes of Dante and his 13th century grizzly, blood curdling poem, "The Inferno." The notion of heaven and hell would prove extremely useful to the church. Fearful and frightened people are easily manipulated.

If any of the adults in my childhood church knew Hell to be a figure of speech about personal and social conditions on earth, none of them let me in on that secret. I had nightmares. At age seven, I made a deal with God. I asked Jesus into my heart. And just like that I was "saved." WHEW! Jesus was suddenly my Savior—my life and fire insurance policy all in one.

Well, as it turns out many people want Jesus as *Savior*. I mean, who doesn't want to be saved from Hell? Yes, of course, many people want Jesus as a Savior but not so many want Jesus as *Master and Guide* because that requires practicing a bold and sometimes sacrificial love. It means standing up for people and accepting the consequences. It means forgiving over and over again. It means eating with people who aren't so loveable. It means not condemning others or fantasizing about their eternal punishment. It means loving your enemy even if it kills you.

That is Christ's *way* and it can be our way, too, for we also are the beloved children of God. "As the Father has sent me into the world, so send I you." We are "sent" to live like Christ. It's what the Gospel of John means when it says Jesus is the way, the truth and life—not a one-way ticket to the hereafter but a way of living abundantly in the world now.

"Eternal" in this gospel means quality, not quantity, not everlasting (that's a different word). Eternal life is about a quality of life now, not later or elsewhere. "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." To believe in Jesus is to give your heart to the way of Christ.

The Presbyterian tradition links us through Jesus to an ancient earth-based, community of wisdom. Judaism. In that wisdom tradition (to which we belong) "salvation" is a multifaceted word. It is related to the word *salve*, health, healing and wholeness. So whatever else John 3:16 is about, it's about healing in more ways than one. It's about love.

God so *loved* the world. *Whoever* believes will not perish but have eternal life. To accept love is to live abundantly. To refuse love is to perish. We don't need anyone to condemn us; we condemn ourselves when we refuse love.

As C. S. Lewis put it: the gates of hell (if there be such a place) are locked from the *inside*. But even so Love seeks us out and stands at the door knocking and knocking and knocking. It's what we mean, in part, in the Apostles' Creed when we say: *He descended into hell*. Or as the Jewish poet put it in Psalm 139: If I descend into Sheol, O God, you are there. There is nowhere we can be that God is not also present.

Love is our salvation.

To be saved is to be brought back to your senses. To be saved is to make up with someone. To be saved is to get another lease on life. To be saved is to rise from despair into hope. To be saved is to love so much fear can't stop you. To be saved is to feel forgiven right down to the bone. To be saved is to be fully present in the moment. To be saved is to quit addictions and breathe freely again. To be saved is to behold the world as though for the first time, to lose your breath, to sing and dance and shout WOW. To be saved is to accept forgiveness, then get up and start mending the world one touch, one person at a time. To be saved is to live in harmony with the earth and all its creatures. To be saved is to reinvest in the works of love when the economy is sinking into the toilet. To be saved is to find our way home. To be saved is to sing the praises of love for ten thousand years and feel as though we've just begun.

It's absolutely amazing what a little bit of love can do.