

Sermon Title: *O Love of God, how Rich and Pure*

John 3:16-18 (The Message)

¹⁶⁻¹⁸“This is how much God loved the world: God gave a Son, God’s one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending the Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person’s failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

Revelation 21:1-8 (NRSV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. The Lord will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ wiping every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

A key principle of Buddhism is that, we can begin to change the world by first changing how we look at the world. *We can begin to change the world by first changing how we look at the world.*

My Uncle John was a teacher for many years in a pretty tough school district in Indianapolis. He worked with kids who were considered to have Emotional Disorders and Behavioral Disorders. Two of the students he taught are now on living on Indiana's Death Row.

As you can imagine, it took a toll on my uncle John. I am sure many of you get the 'Sunday Night' blues as you mentally start to prepare to head back to work on Monday morning. My uncle says that on Sunday nights he would start to get these crazy stomach aches – it was so bad that he would lie on his bed, pull up his shirt, and he could actually see his stomach moving and gurgling. All from stress.

Finally he decided that something had to change. So, he decided that he was not going to physically restrain kids anymore. I don't know if this is still something that is taught and used in such classrooms, but at least at this time, he was trained that often you had to restrain kids that were getting physical or out of control. They were shown certain ways to take kids down and hold and them until they calmed down. Despite this training and what he was told were 'best practices' of that time, he decided he was not going to restrain a kid again.

And, he said, this made all the difference. It kept him in that job years longer than he would have been otherwise. Those Sunday evening stomach aches still came at times, but less often and much less painful. It didn't change the kids he was working with – he still spent hours

with students until they calmed down, sometimes as they threw desks across the room and screamed profanities at him. But it changed him – his actions were now more consistent with what his deeper values were; his actions more in-line with what he believed needed to happen. And, he believes, that kids generally calmed down much sooner when they weren't being restrained.

We can begin to change the world by first changing how we look at the world.

When we look out over this beautiful and broken world, what is it that we see? A place to be feared? A world mostly filled with enemies – with people who want to do us harm? When we look to our southern border do we see murders, rapists and terrorists trying to get in? Do we see people fleeing for their lives; people seeking a way to simply survive and feed their children?

When we look across the ocean do we see people who hate our freedom? Do we see people who have suffered trauma; people who are suffering from lack of food, lack of educational opportunities, lack of the basic human right to grow-up in peace? Community organizer and educator Mariame Kaba says, “no one enters violence the first time by committing it.”¹ People’s first encounter with violence is not when they decide to use violence – they have always experienced violence first somewhere along the way.

A study released this month shows that by the end of the 2019 fiscal year, our country will have spent a total of \$5.9 trillion on the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and other countries (this includes veterans' care, interest on debt payments, and all other spending for Homeland Security

¹ Kaba’s work focuses on ending violence, dismantling the prison industrial complex, transformative justice and supporting youth leadership development. To learn more see <http://mariamekaba.com/>

and State Departments related to this on-going wars).² This on-going 17 year conflict has spanned three presidents and seen funding increased by people both political parties.

Nearly [three million](#) Americans have deployed since 2001, many for numerous tours.

Nearly half a million people have died from violence in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan since we declared a “war on terror” – more than 480,000 deaths from violence, including soldiers, militants, police, contractors, journalists, humanitarian workers and civilians. Several times as many people have died indirectly because of water loss, sewage and other infrastructural problems, and war-related disease. These wars have uprooted 21 million Afghan, Iraqi, Pakistani and Syrian people who are now refugees of war or internally displaced. Lord, have mercy.

These are the costs of war. These are the costs of looking out and seeing a world to fear, a world that wishes to do us harm. Do we see a world in need of more military intervention; do we see a world in need of healing and hope.

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Even as people of peace, we still have largely been captured by images of a Violent God – what we see when we look at God, is still often a picture of God who chooses violence to solve all the world’s problems. Because of much of the theology we have been given, our imaginations are still flooded with a God of Divine Violence. These images impact us – I think they impact much of American Christianity who continues to look to war and military intervention as the answer to all of our problems. I am not just talking about the wars and violence of the Old Testament; much

² Study can be found at https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019%20.pdf

For discussion of study, see https://www.democracynow.org/2018/11/21/costs_of_war_17_years_after

of how we conceive of and teach the New Testament has maintained a God with a lot of rage – a God that needs to be appeased – a God who, in the end, chooses the weapons of war.

Theologically speaking, we generally think of the world coming to a violent end. The Christian imagination has been captured with ideas of the rapture and a world that will end in a great battle. We have this final view that, in the end, God has to use violence to make things right – that even for God, there really is only one way for a final victory – that is through the use of violence. Our human brains seem stuck on this, despite all that Jesus said and did, we can't imagine a different way God could possibly end things.

We must remember that the book of Revelation is not literal. It was not intended to be literal. It is strange metaphor upon strange metaphor – metaphors written in a different form and different time. It is not a code to be unlocked.

And even the metaphorical images used in the book, they should make us question our violent imagination: who is it that wins this epic final battle – a slain lamb. And the annihilation of the earth that we generally associate with rapture and *Revelation*, this is also not really the image that exists in the John's revelation. John writes of a “new heaven and a new earth.” Professor Steve Bouma-Prediger points out that the Greek word for ‘new’ used here does not mean absolutely new. It means new in quality, not existence. New means “renewed”, not “brand new.” John is speaking of a renovated heaven and earth. God, in this image, does not junk the world and start all over. God renews the earth and brings it to fulfillment.³

And notice also that the new Jerusalem in this image comes down out of heaven to earth.

We do not go to heaven. Heaven comes to us, just as we should expect from a God who

³ This section on Revelation 21 comes from Steven Bouma-Prediger's article in “Creation Care and Salvation” in the Spring 2008 issue of *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*.

graciously takes the initiative to redeem us by God's love. God comes to us when we are unable or unwilling to go to God. And we should also take note of where God is in this image.

"Behold," says the voice from the throne, "the home of God is among humans." As with the Israelites being lead out of Egypt and through the wilderness, as with the Jesus coming in flesh to teach us, so also here God pitches her tent with the likes of us. God will make God's home among us.

"Behold," the voice continues, "I am making all things new." Not all new things, but all things new. There is literally a world of difference between these two. Not all new things, but all things renewed, refurbished, renovated, redeemed. Salvation is not the replacement of a creation destroyed and abandoned by a violent and vindictive God – salvation is the renovation and renewal of what God has lovingly made and providentially sustained. All things new. God dwells with us. Heaven comes to earth.

Just because our imaginations are usually limited by the 'myth of redemptive violence' does not mean that God's imagination is so limited.

We can begin to change the world by first changing how we look at the world.

We also generally see a violent God when we look at the cross. The main ways we speak of the atonement, about the saving work of Jesus' death and resurrection, are usually images of an angry God who needs to be appeased.

I think that changing how we look at these can also help us in changing how we look at the world – as many theologians have said, we imitate the type of God we believe in. If we worship a God who resolves all problems with violence and judgment, we are likely to act this way as well.

Perhaps our most famous Christian scripture says, “For God so loved the world that He gave his only Begotten Son.” (Or, in *The Message*: “This is how much God loved the world: God gave a Son, God’s one and only Son.”) But, as Bishop N.T. Wright points out, most of the time, how we talk about this event is more like “For God so hated the world that He killed his only Son.”⁴

The primary way we have been taught Jesus’ death and resurrection is that God required a sacrifice – that God’s vengeance had to be appeased, and so Jesus became that sacrifice. This too is ultimately a God who requires blood – a God who cannot be made whole unless someone suffers and dies, unless someone is punished. A God who chooses a violent solution.

Now, in the mystery of God, I would never be so presumptuous and bold as to stand up here and explain the mechanics of how Jesus’ life, death and resurrection redeemed the world. I would only say that, somehow, in the mystery of God – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has saved us. Somehow, God took the worst violence of humans, and used that to save the world. In that event God did not chose vengeance; in that event Jesus did not call down legions of angels to save and avenge him; in that event, Jesus showed that darkness does not drive out darkness, only light can do that. It is my belief that in that event, it was the love of God that saved the world, not the vengeance of God.

And so, perhaps, we need to continue to move away from these old understandings of a God who solves all problems with violence. Perhaps in order to see the world differently, we too have to continue to see God differently. A God who solves the worlds problems with the strength of love, not the strength of the sword. As the song says, if the oceans were filled with ink and the

⁴ From Brian Zahnd’s interview on the podcast *The Bible for Normal People*.

skies were made of paper, and if every stalk of grass and hay was a pen, and if each humans job was to write – we still could not complete the job of writing of God’s love.⁵

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What is it that we see as we look over this beautiful and broken world? A place to be feared?

People who need to be locked up? A God who will end this project through great violence and the destruction of all that She created?

Do we see a place of brokenness; People who need healing, not bombing? Do we see a God of love. A God who loves us all the most. A God who restores all things, not destroys all things?

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May we be a people of a renewed vision – a people who see with the eyes of love. Amen.

⁵ From the song “The Love of God” in the song book *Sing the Journey*: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2005.