

This sermon was delivered by W.C. Turner on March 9, 2003, at Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church in Durham, N.C

Lesson: John 3: 1- 16

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.

God So Loved The World

The message today comes out of a suppressed passion to speak out in the face of the present global crisis and a confrontation with the first part of a verse I have known for as long as my memory stretches. My passion has been checked out of a desire to speak rightly, rather than simply say what I feel. But coming across this verse I know and love so much compels a declaration. We have heard from our children, we have heard from activists, we have heard from the nations and some of the churches. Other churches have spoken by their silence. As the prophet and teacher in this house, God forbids that I speak by silence. God loves the world.

My deep concern is the moral issues that are at stake in the war to which we seem to be racing as a nation. As I view the matter, the consequences are enormous, and I tremble to think that the prophets of God might not declare them with clarity. For the record, I have no intention of repeating these words in a ceaseless drone. But on this day I feel obligated to state as clearly as possible how I read the word and see our calling under God in light of our current situation. Further, as is my custom when I make a statement such as this, I will make the text available and invite discussion of the same—particularly from those who may be prone to take exception.

For some time now I have found myself praying for “the world God has not ceased to love.” When I so much as consider another possibility regarding God’s passion for the world I shudder and tremble in fear. Can you so much as ponder a world God has ceased to love, or a world that has been surrendered to the human creature—even the best and brightest among us. No, God’s love and care for the world is ceaseless, and the exercise of that care and the profusion of that love have not been turned over to another. God so loved the world that he gave the only begotten Son.

This verse so well known and well beloved is inserted as a discourse in the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. We recall the story about how this ruler of the Jews came to Jesus by night, acknowledging that he was a teacher who came from God. As is the pattern in the fourth gospel, such encounters become the occasion for teaching the essential mysteries of the faith. They expose the dullness of the one who prompts them, and in so

doing expose impediments to faith that must be remedied in those who would believe on the Son for life.

Jesus declares the mystery of birth from above, showing how it is at the very heart of God's disposition of grace and love toward the creation. He summarizes that disposition in a verse that for many is the gospel in a capsule. One can find no greater summary of divine love than the declaration that God loved the world in such a manner as to reach into his very bosom and give the Son who is begotten from eternity and send him in the form of the creation.

God so loved the world. That is, God entered the creation in a self-giving act that embraced a condition best described as perishing. Note that the word for love here is not one of the options that might be compared to desire, an intention to possess, or a bond that exists among those who are essentially like one another. No, the form of this love is "agape." It is not predicated on worth, merit, or kinship. Rather, it is an affirming love that reveals the character and passion of the one extending it. This is the sort of love that bestows worth, value, dignity. By loving the world in such a manner we come to know who God is. This manifestation of love is consistent with the declarations, "I Am." God is known through the manifestation of this love, not through general and universal claims concerning the divine nature.

God loves the world with all its estrangement, in all its variety, with all its diverse make-up. Not afraid of scandal, God embraced the lowliest of the nations in his choice of Israel, and through the decimated line of Judah sent the Son Jesus Christ. God is not covered by human scandals or limited in who can be embraced. God's choice is what instructs us in the way of love. It extends to the entire cosmos.

God so loved the world—not just Israel, not just the church. God loves the world—not just the United States, not just the West, not just NATO. God loves the world, not just the nations that are pious, not only when the nations are good. God's love is not limited to those who confess the Son. The category "whosoever believeth" pertains to everlasting life; it does not prescribe or proscribe whom God loves. The love of God is not limited to those who think they are nice or those whom the nice ones approve. God so loved the world.

This confrontation with God's love causes me deep concern for the moral consequences of the war into which we are being talked. I call it a war into which we are being talked because it targets a nation that has not attacked us. Neither has it pronounced any threats against us. Such an attack would be an overt departure from the articulated restraints that have guided us in the past and would set a dangerous precedence for the world in this millennium.

My prayer is for the hand of God to restrain and guide us. Is it naïve to pray? Is it too late to pray? Some would say it is. But the Lord taught us that we ought always pray, indicating that the alternative is fainting. Besides, what is prayed is what is believed, and I believe God can do all things.

Let me go further to say that I am no fan or champion of Saddam Hussein. He is one of many leaders in the world who has the capacity to inflict great damage on human beings. Many nations, including this one, have weapons capable of killing people by the millions. He along with other leaders has a questionable mandate to rule. He has been accused of heinous crimes. The world would be a safer place if he were disarmed. But it would be even safer if other nations, some of whom possess greater arsenals, would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

I make no pretense at being a military strategist or a politician. It may well be that I am naïve, and I am quite prepared to accept the rap. But as a follower of Jesus Christ I am impervious to the charge of being un-realistic, when he is the Reality who judges a world that is estranged from its creator and is wooed by the chords of divine love.

My chief issue is the morality of this nation's position, and the moral fallout of the course of action to which our leader appears to be committed. Even more, I am concerned that the distinction between the word of the nation and the word of the church remain clear. This is a time for the church to speak to the nation. Such speech is crucial in every era, and especially when there are no other powers to supply restraint.

Let me also hasten to add that the position I take is not a lack of support for young men and women who are enlisted in the armed services. They are our sons and daughters. Some of them entered the military to keep from being gobbled up by the streets. They are under orders. Many have never been confronted by the moral ambiguity of warfare.

The best way to support them is to keep them out of harm's way. Even when the cause is just they need to know that war is evil: it is not fantasy; it is not just another job; it is not a game. It is a byproduct of human sin. When the cause is just repentance is in order, and at best we rely on the mercy of God. We continue to pray for them—for their life, for their safe return, for their health and sanity.

After the trigger has been pulled we will be called to rally in support of the president and the troops. Now is the time to pray; now is the time to speak. This is the true support. Once war has started issues of morality are clouded by patriotism, which is not the issue for the Christian. The greatest love for the nation is to speak the truth and to pray in truth.

The greatest danger for the world is the exhaustion of moral funds. Following the course of pre-emption without heeding the counsel of the nations is nothing less than naked aggression. Following such action speech regarding morality in the public sphere will be a laughing matter—no more than a joke. What's more, the doctrine of pre-emption articulates the rationale by which any nation may attack another when it perceives a threat and deems itself powerful enough commit the act. The bleeding that is presently occurring between self defense and pre-emption, between disarming and regime change amounts to no more than the reversal of the Lord's instruction: put crassly, it is the doctrine that teaches, "Do unto others before they do unto you."

Overwhelming force does not insure safety, as a mere glance at global conflicts reveals. It perpetuates the cycle of violence, producing more enlistees filled with the bitterness that is choking the human family. It hardens the resistance against considering the morality and lack thereof in social and foreign policy. It blinds the perpetrators to the pain and suffering of other human beings, whose lives are every bit as valuable, in the name of a cause or an ideology.

If the contest is a matter of principle why isn't Korea treated with the same hand. No, it is about power, the will to power, and cold calculation of military superiority. It is about the illusion that there can be warfare that is "surgically clean," and a false confidence in hardware to strike with precision and minimal civilian casualties. Or, is it an experiment with new hardware? We have been warned of the mass starvation that will ensue when the first bombs are dropped, and of the human carnage that will be left behind. No matter how smart the weapons, there will be untold human suffering. The notion of collateral damage does not remove the human face.

It is beyond tragic when a nation forgets the language of repentance, when it leaves itself no way to turn back, when it cannot acknowledge the possibility of being hasty, of being wrong. Even more tragic is for the church not to plead for the consideration that God might be guiding in a different direction, or that the only voice to be heard is not the one that speaks in tones of might and power.

For my part, I never thought I would see the day when I would be praying for Russia to be the advocate of restraint in the world. During the fifties and beyond, the Cold War theology of hyper-evangelicalism all but named Russia as the bear of the Apocalypse, and the King of the North. The ruler of Russia was the Antichrist. Under the domination Khrushchev promised, nobody would be able to buy bread or milk without his mark. Now I pray for God to act through Russia, China, and France to restrain this godly nation. How ironic! This is not a battle of light versus darkness. There is sufficient darkness from each camp to prompt prayer for the True Light.

It is a serious moral mistake to disregard the counsel of the nations, as if dissenting nations and the peoples of the earth do not matter. Handling the nations with a strong arm, bully tactics, and bribery is sure to bring forth a bitter harvest in the future. Indeed, the present crisis is rooted in these immoral practices. Policies and practices are not right simply because a nation has the military might to enforce them. Under such conditions the moral weight is even greater.

There are knowledges with which we need to be concerned that do not come from sophisticated modern, computer-driven hardware. There is moral knowledge that comes forth when we pray and when we respect one another. It is lethally dangerous to put all our confidence in spy planes, intelligence gathering, which amounts to the deification of technology. Vilification of human beings and treating them as caged rats who have no right to fight is a dehumanizing act, especially when done against the counsel of others who also possess wisdom.

God loves the people of Iraq as much as God loves the people of the United States. O how wonderful if the leader of that nation could see some sign from our actions of how our God teaches us to behave. But whether or not that is the case, the prophets of God are under their mandate. Some cannot be silent.

Our job is to hold up the mirror to the nation, to replay the language so we see how it sounds. Much of what we are hearing sounds like the prideful language of Babel, which God rejected from of old. The syntax of that language says or suggests that there is a way for the human creature to rise above God, to escape the judgment of God. It assumes there is a way to make the world safe by a human design—by taking charge, taking matters into our hands. It is a practice that ignores culpability in the present state of affairs and cannot see judgment in the crucible of historical experience.

Only God can love the world so as to have a will worth imposing upon it. Human creatures are finite, and not even the brightest of us can envision what is best for people in disregard for their circumstances, history, and location. No matter what chauvinistic attitudes there may be toward one way of life and how much disdain there may be for another, a “God-complex” is required for imposing one’s will on others.

As a nation we desperately need to know that we do not have to dominate the world to be loved by God. If we were weak God would still love us. If we admitted we have been hasty, that we have acted out fear and resentment more than faith, God would still love us. If we take counsel from the nations God will still love us, and the nations will have more respect for us. We could even regain some moral funds in the global marketplace.

Only God can love the world so as to have a will worth imposing upon it. But look at how God did it: he gave his only begotten Son. He came among us to show the way of life and lead us into obedience. He became one of us and took on our condition and showed us the way of life.

Like the Son, those who believe on his name have only the way of God for imposing our will. We do it through declaring and living the truth. We have no escape. We too will be tainted if or when the bloodletting begins. This is why we are both justified and compelled to cry loud, spare not, and lift up our voices like a trumpet.

The philosopher, Fredrick Nietzsche, openly and crudely expressed disdain for Christianity as a religion that supported the weak. His view was that the best thing to do for the weak is to mash them, wipe them out, or hasten their demise. Those who assume moral superiority can surely extend such an attitude toward those whose behavior we consider debase or reprobate.

But thank God, that is not the treatment we received. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. O that Christians could be so honest as to say: We share the scandal of our God who loved the world, and we are willing to pay the price for walking in God's way.