

Shedding Light on Good Deeds
Sunday, March 22, In the Year of Our LORD, 2009
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

John 3:16-21

John 3:16-21 may be the Gospel Lectionary Lesson for today to be read in most of English-speaking Christendom, but the first verse of those six was in the news yesterday for a very different reason. While basketball fans in this part of New York were celebrating Siena's double overtime win over Ohio State in the first round of the NCAA Tournament dubbed "March Madness," one fan at that Siena basketball fan became infamous because of ... John 3:16.

This is the reference to a "You Tube" clip that greeted many of us yesterday morning:

Security guard snatches 'John 3:16' sign from Siena fan

By Chris Chase

The man who popularized the "John 3:16", Rollen Stewart, sign at sporting events is in prison for kidnapping, but his quest to inject biblical references into major sporting events lives on. During yesterday's first round games in Dayton, a number of John 3:16 signs made their way into CBS camera shots. One such sign was behind the Siena bench, which displeased a security guard – who is seen in a video clip, snatching the sign away from the young man (it's about 15 seconds into the video – google search – Basketball John 3:16). Perhaps the security guard was more of a fan of Matthew's gospel. Maybe he thinks John 3:17 is the superior passage. ... I'm no biblical scholar, but if I had to perform an exegesis on that line, I'd guess it has something to do with snatching played-out signs from the hands of a doofus.

While I am not about to enter into the legal issues of snatching a sign away from a fan or the rights of a network to determine what will be shown in as visible a location as behind a basketball bench or in the case of football games, behind and through the goalposts, I confess I think I am never pleased with what comes across as "in your face" religion. It will come as no surprise that some groups have pounced on the story as further evidence of an anti-religious sentiment in this country. Some of the headlines for this You Tube clip have "identified" the security guard as an atheist. *My* objection is how "over exposure" to anything can – I repeat, *can* – dilute an intended impact. So, just as I am concerned that words of faith as with some of the creeds or even the LORD's Prayer can become rote, repeated so much as to lose even a sense of what one is saying, so, the most familiar words of Scripture, be they the 23rd Psalm or John 3:16, can become, dare I say, almost trite.

That said, the most interesting part of Mr. Chase's short article about the Siena-Ohio State basketball game and the John 3:16 sign is his reference to John 3:17. I suspect, Mr. Chase was simply mentioning *any* other verse of Scripture to juxtapose with John 3:16, but those of us in attendance at our adult bible class six days ago realize that Mr. Chase, whether he intended it or not, was a bit on target. To cut to the "chase," pun intended, John 3:16 is incomplete without the context of the rest of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus and the 17th verse acts almost like a

corrective lens to those who want to read the 16th verse in a vacuum and add a message *that is not there*.

We recognize that Jesus was and is more intelligent than any other mere human, but in this instance I envision Jesus, having just completed the sentence we call John 3:16 thinking, “O, that has some wiggle room for misinterpretation – a bet there is some ‘doofus’ out there who is going to turn the sentence around and put all of the emphasis of what I just said about believers inheriting eternal life and put all of their energy into proclaiming what happens to those who do *not* believe.”

Those are *my* words that I just put in Jesus’ mouth – and there is little legitimacy to that, but something like that compelled Jesus to complete the thought. Hear the two verses together:

For God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

Granted, the 18th verse *does* speak of condemnation for those who do not believe, but the seventeenth verse tells us the primary purpose behind God sending the Christ into our midst – and that was and still is to “save the world.”

With that as a backdrop and foundation, we turn to the 21st verse of John 3.

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what has been done has been done through God.

From time to time, it behooves us to take a step back from all of the “bad news” that fills our airwaves and printed press and celebrate the good works that is done in the name of that Christ Whose presence invites us to participate in saving the world. As persons continually challenged to give of our time and talent and effort for the people of our communities and the world, there are occasions, like today, when we are asked to give a little more as in the “One Great Hour of Sharing” offering. In that invitation, we hear the call of our God to sacrifice of ourselves that the truth of the gospel, that is the ongoing presence of God’s presence through that which is of Christ, might be obvious to all peoples of the world. This is where there is a direct juxtaposition to waving a sign that reads “John 3:16.” While faith - that is our belief in God and God’s creating and redeeming acts throughout all time - while our faith comes first, it is what we do as an expression of our faith that speaks louder.

Most of us can quickly quote the maxim “actions speak louder than words,” but a Carolyn Wells once wrote what is perhaps more telling: “Action lie louder than words.” Now, I can’t help myself. Speaking of actions that belie one words, [as quoted from various sources]

Rollen Stewart, the man who wore the funny colorful wig and held up John 3:16 placards at sporting events in the 1970 and 1980s was arrested in [1992](#) after a standoff in a [California](#) hotel. Apparently, he entered a vacant room with two men he was attempting to kidnap and surprised a chambermaid who then locked herself in the bathroom. Stewart believed the [Rapture](#) was due to arrive in six days and during the standoff, he threatened to shoot at airplanes taking off from nearby [Los Angeles International Airport](#). He covered the hotel room windows with "John 3:16" placards.

(facetiously) That is just the kind of publicity the Christian church needs, is it not? As a result of that stunt, of all those John 3:16 placards in the windows, how many people turned to John 3:16 are were “saved?”

A few years ago, there was a spate of activity that unfolded under another maxim – “acts of random kindness.” Do we not believe that to be truly Christ-like, is to demonstrate ones love of others in ways that give glory to God. Indeed, when we celebrate or shed light on the good deeds that people perform, we need to ensure that it is the God of that person’s faith to Whom glory be given. Here is the corollary: to accomplish a good deed for the sake of being seen for having performed that good deed is counter to the ways of doing good for the sake of doing good. Let’s simplify that sentence: do something good for someone not because you will be noticed or because you will be thanked, but because you want to do something good for someone. Give because it is right to give. OK, if you get a tax break from Uncle Sam and Uncle Paterson, so be it – but give of your resources, your time, your energy because in so doing, the act of kindness will be noted by someone – and if not attributable to you the giver, will, nonetheless, be attributable to an energy some might call God.

The irony in all of this is that some of the greatest good is accomplished by people who do not claim the Christian mantle or any religious nomenclature. Perhaps those persons are good because God works through them, through what some theologians call the “invisible Christ.” Perhaps those persons know they are Christian but want to disassociate themselves from the – clearly, I like Mr. Chase’s word – doofus-like persons who think faith and religion are all about signs at sporting events, louder and in your face proclamations to holiness that belie the truth. The real truth was given to the world in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth. That truth is manifest today in our acts of kindness, acts of grace, acts of reconciliation and acts of love that are far removed from the spotlight of “spectacular” popular events like the NCAA tournament and instead occur off the beaten paths of human life. That truth changes human hearts and souls in ways far more profound. That truth is reflected in the good works done by ordinary people – but for the glory of God.

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what has been done has been done through God.

Amen.