

July 12, 2015  
First Presbyterian Church, Athens Ga.

Rev. Bob Googe, preaching

For God So Loved the World.  
John 3:16

Those of you who have heard me preach more than once have an inkling of what I am about to say.

Months ago I was asked for a sermon topic and texts. I provided them. John and I even had an email conversation about the theme of my sermon so he could plan music. On Wednesday I ok'd the sermon title and texts for this Sunday. Then I had an experience, which just begged me to preach a different sermon. I could not ignore it because it is an experience I have over and over and over again.

So I set aside the sermon I was working on to tell you about a family friend. This friend has had some challenges in life with family, finances and relationships. In other words, he's sort of normal. He has always had a very strong faith that was nurtured in a home and church where the rules about God were clear: Believe that the Bible is the literal and inerrant message from God and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal savior, followed by a long list of things you are not supposed to do. And, as it does for so many people, that worked for him for a long time.

Then in a fit of adventurism he went away to teach English in another country where Christianity is not the predominant religion. He met Buddhists, and Hindus, and Muslims. And like most people in most places the people he met and worked with were kind, and caring, loved their families and their faith and . . . some were even Christ like in their kindness and behavior. When he returned home to pursue a Masters and then a Ph.D. in literature he met some people whose relationships did not quite fit the mold that he had been taught was the only one way relationships are supposed to be. And many of these people were kind, and devoted to their families, and devout in their faith and some, some were even Christ like in their kindness and behavior.

Over the years we watched our friend became less judgmental, more accepting, more open, kinder, gentler – more, shall I say, Christ like.

And just the other day he sat at my kitchen table and said, "I miss church. I wish I could go back." I said, "Why don't you go back?" He said, "Well, I still love Jesus, I still believe in Jesus, but well, I just don't believe like I used to believe. I honestly think that God would probably strike me down if I set foot in a church. And there is no doubt I am now going to hell. Plus I don't think the church wants me back." He was not joking.

Y'all seriously, this is a conversation I have had over and over and over and over, to the point where I can simply not believe that I am still having this conversation. And just in case you think it was only because he was raised in a more theologically

conservative denomination – I have this conversation or some variation of it with Presbyterians on a regular basis.

This understanding of who God is and what we think the Bible teaches makes me so very very sad. Guess what verse came up when I asked him where he got the idea that he was probably going to hell?

John 3:16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

Growing up I was taught and he was taught that John 3:16 means that you need to say the right words, believe exactly the right things and you get to go to heaven but if you do not say the right words, believe exactly the right things then you will perish, you will go to hell. So this text, which is about the life giving power of following Jesus, is really a death sentence for all of us who do not believe enough or believe in the right way, which of course, is all of us.

As I sat there stunned listening to him, I decided I have to preach about this. I cannot keep hearing this over and over and not say something about it. I decided to go Greek geek and look at the words that make up this text; I mean really look at them.

So buckle up, here we go;

John 3:16 - maybe the most abused, misused and poorly understood text in the New Testament. And as boring as it may sound, I think the best way to get to the heart of this text is to do something that is quite frankly more suited to a Sunday school class than a sermon – we are going to do a word study of the words “believe” and “perish” and then I am going to spend a few minutes on our understanding of eternal life (heaven) and the words translated hell. It’s going to be a lot. I’m going to shove 50 lbs. of manure in a 5 lbs. bag in about 10 minutes!

And fair warning, I sort of geek out about this stuff so while there is a good chance you will doze off, I find this stuff fascinating. For you note takers . . . this is your sermon!

Let’s look at the word believe. And for this section I am indebted to Dr. Karen Armstrong and her book *The Case for God*.

The Greek word translated “believe” in our bible *pistis* or its verbal form *pisteuo* (and since Jesus was speaking he said “*pisteuo*”) means: trust, loyalty, engagement, commitment; but when Jerome translated from Greek into Latin for the Vulgate *pistis* became *fides* (loyalty). Unfortunately the word *fides* actually had no verbal form in Latin so for *pisteuo* he chose *credo*, a word derived from *cor do* (I give you my heart). When the Vulgate was translated into English *credo* became “I Believe” in the King James Version in 1611.

By the late 1600's as science began its rise the word "believe" began to be used by scientist to mean an intellectual assent to a hypothetical idea, something they understood. And as most of us know, the language of science and fact is the language of western civilization. Centuries ago western culture jettisoned the religious language of myth and story – language that points to things that cannot be explained or completely understood – like faith, and loyalty and love. Put quite simply, what most of us think of as "belief" is not at all what the text says.

Biblically, Jesus did not ask people to "believe" in him or his divinity. He asked people for *pistis* – for commitment, for people who would engage in his mission – to give all they had to the poor, to feed the hungry, to abandon their pride, to lay aside their sense of self-importance, to live like the lilies of the field and to trust God. They were called to spread this good news to tax collectors, and prostitutes and everyone, not just to the respectable or conventionally virtuous. Such *pistis* could in fact move mountains and change lives. It was not belief as we think of it, it was action, it was life, it was The Way, not a theological idea to believe in but a way of life to be lived.

I'm going to take this thought to what I think is a logical conclusion and say that based on what the words meant when they were written, not hundreds or a couple thousand years later but what the words meant at the time they were written, John 3:16 is not about whether you believe that Jesus is the son of God. Actually your belief in that creed is irrelevant to this text – what John 3:16 calls us to be is committed to the way of life Jesus taught. Wow! Now, that, that is a life changer. That is life giving and liberating.

So, if biblically "believe" means to follow, to be loyal to, to be living the Way, then what does "perish" mean? Does it mean, hell, eternal damnation? Oh perish the thought my friends!

In the New Testament the word translated perish in John 3:16 is *Apollumi*. It shows up 90 times- 23 times it means destroy, 21 times it means to lose, 3 times to be destroyed, 10 times to be lost like I was on my way to dinner in Atlanta on Friday night, once it means to be marred as in disfigured like with the small scar on my lip, once to die, and 33 times it is translated as perish. Same word.

But never in the Bible, not one time, does perish in its literal or contextual meanings ever mean an everlasting process without end. Nowhere does it mean endless torment. In fact it never means torment or punishment in any form, much less everlasting torment and punishment. In other words it does not mean what most of us think of as hell: Eternal damnation, everlasting fire and agony.

Pausing for a moment to rework John 3:16 into what it says and means in the Greek at the time it is written, we have: For God so loved the world that anyone who patterns their life after Jesus, who commits their loyalty to his teaching and way of life will not be destroyed, lost, cut off, dismissed.

Now, that is radically different than what I was taught was the selling point of John 3:16, which was basically that giving my mental assent, my “belief,” gave me a free get out of hell card.

So – that leaves us with hell and heaven.

Let’s pick on hell first. 4 words in the Old Testament and the New Testament have been at one time or another translated as “hell” – sheol, hades, tartarus and gehenna.

Sheol shows up only in the Old Testament. It is the place of the dead. Sheol is neither heaven nor hell, it was where everyone went when they died. Only in the Latin Vulgate, the King James Version and New King James Version does the word hell even appear in the Old Testament. In more accurate translations (we’ve had a bit more scholarship happen in the last 400 years and have access to more ancient manuscripts than they had in 1611) the word sheol shows up 65 times and is accurately translated as – the pit, the grave.

In the New Testament the word Hades appears 11 times and is the Greek word translated directly from Sheol. In most modern versions hades is now translated accurately as the grave or the pit.

Tartarus occurs only once in the Greek in 2 Peter 2:4 – where God tosses some rogue angels but even there they were held in Tartarus until judgement not for everlasting torture.

Gehenna – is used in the New Testament 12 times and 11 of those 12 times it is Jesus who uses the word. Gehenna was the valley of Hinnom and was the garbage pit of ancient Jerusalem, outside the city walls. There were constant fires and smoke. It was cold at night and wild dogs came to eat from the dump. If you were in Gehenna there was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

So, when Jesus uses the word translated “hell” in our bibles he is using the word Gehenna. It was and is a real place. It was a place you did not want to be, ever. If you were out in the dump you were lost, cut off. Now, however Gehenna is a park with nice lawns and trees. When I was in Jerusalem I had a picnic and played Frisbee in hell. Such is the power of God!

The reality is that not one single word in the Hebrew or the Greek means hell as a place of eternal punishment for either misbehavior or inadequate belief. It simply is not in the bible.

Our images of eternal damnation and torture with demons and flames and never ending punishment come mostly from Milton in Paradise lost and Dante’s Inferno. But let me be really clear – they are not biblical.

Finally, before you drift off on me: Everlasting life / eternity – are translated from the Hebrew word *owlam* and the Greek word *aionion*. These words, or one of their tenses, show up 93 times in the Bible. It gets a lot of ink! This word is translated as age (20), ages (6), ancient time (1), beginning of time (1), course (1), eternal (2), eternity (1), ever (2), forever (27), forever and ever (20), forevermore (2), long ago (1), never (1), old (1), time (1), world (7), worlds (1). Notice that the translations of some of these words have opposite meanings!

If you trace the word *aionion* back to its original meaning you get all the way to Socrates through the writings of Plato and the definition is, “that which causes life, breath.

So, continuing our rework on this text taking it back to what the words meant when the authors wrote them: For God so loved the world that anyone who patterns their life after Jesus, who commits their loyalty to his teaching and way of life will not be destroyed, lost, cut off, dismissed. They will be that which causes life; they will be the life giving breath.

So this is fascinating to me. John 3:16 is not about what you believe, it is not about who Jesus is, it is not about eternal salvation or damnation.

I wanted to end here but I am sure there are those who think I have lost my mind or at least wonder – If he is right how did we end up with our common understanding or misunderstanding of believe, perish, eternal life and hell. Very quickly – and this is a class topic - three main reasons – 1. When you translate from one language to another you almost always have to make decisions about nuance and meaning because rarely do words translate perfectly. No one, no one can translate without making decisions that are influenced by who they are and what they have experienced. 2. The meaning of words changes over time. The old English word that becomes our word “believe” did in fact at one time mostly mean loyalty to, commitment to, rather than mental assent to an idea. Chaucer used believe to mean loyalty. Shakespeare used believe this way in *All’s Well That Ends Well* a few years before the King James Version was published. 3. Power and politics have always shaped biblical translation and that would be a really interesting class topic!

So –y’all have suffered enough for one day. Let me wrap with this:

John 3:16 when written was a text of life, not eternal life or eternal damnation but an invitation to live an authentic, God filled life. It was God reaching out to us yet again, despite our lack of “belief.”

In fact the story of the entire Bible is God reaching out over and over again to people who like us, don’t believe enough, are not good enough, aren’t loyal enough, aren’t committed enough. Adam disobeyed a direct command, Noah was a drunk who slept naked for all the world to see, Abraham lied about his wife being his sister and sent her off to Pharaohs bed twice, Isaac was a cheater, David was an adulterer, Peter was a coward and a liar, on and on and on. And still despite this God reached out and

called these people family. People who disobeyed, were not loyal, were not very committed, who turned their back on God more than once; People like us.

See, it comes down to this: For God so loved the world that he somehow came to be among us in the person of Jesus, showing us how to live a full life. And all who follow the way, who follow that example, no matter the losses or the pain, no matter the crucifixions they may suffer or the disappointment they face, will have life, from age to age, and will be the breath of life to those who are around them. And those who do not embrace this way of life will not spend eternity in hell but will unfortunately not experience this full complete life and it will be their loss.

We believe oh God, help thou our unbelief.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.