What Does God’s Love Look Like

 Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Who here has never heard John 3:16? It’s one of the most well known verses in the entirety of scripture and often one of the few passages that people can recite by heart even if they don’t know the book, chapter and verse. But who knows, even now without looking, what John 3:17 says? Who even knows the context of this verse? Our reading pops up in the middle of chapter 3 which is story of the education of Nicodemus. He was one of the Pharisees, one of, if not the only, Pharisees that believed that there was something truly unique and special about Jesus. So it was under cover of darkness that Nicodemus came to Jesus for an explanation for some of his teaching. Jesus had said that one must be born again to see the kingdom of God, and being a seemingly rational thinking human being that didn’t make sense. As Nicodemus says, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born?” A logical question one would say. After all, how would you explain the concept of baptism to someone who has never heard it? And even after Jesus explains Nicodemus still is confused. But then again these are difficult things for us to understand. Before I went on my vicarage I was in a class about Baptism where final exam was a scenario question. The scenario was, pretend you are in the middle seat on an airplane and the person next to you notices you in a collar and asks you, “What is baptism?” You know a simple question. We each went one by one trying to give an explanation that was about 7 minutes long. Many of us spoke about why we baptize infants, we spoke of original sin, washing ourselves clean and even being clothed in robes of righteousness. After we had finished the professor went to the front of the class and stated that all of us had failed the test. Fortunately the next sentence out of his mouth told us that it wasn’t graded anyway, he just wanted us to think it was so we took the assignment seriously and, “stayed up late at night wondering if our explanation was going to be good enough.” It was an important exercise for us though because it got us thinking about how we need to make things more understandable. Not just that, but we really needed to figure out what the most important aspects of baptism were and make sure that we communicated that in a manner that was easy to grasp. And which bible verse is easier to grasp than John 3:16 right?

 So since this verse is so easy to understand and grasp, I’ll ask you a simple question, what does God’s love look like? Do you think that the Israelites felt that God loved them when they found fiery serpents in their camp? I’m sure they didn’t. You know as bad as it is to say, this instance makes me chuckle a bit because it reminds me of a parent disciplining their child. Here we find the nation of Israel once again proclaiming how terrible their lives were now that they are no longer slaves. Now God’s response sounds to me like a parent who is driving the car when their child starts getting upset and the parent says, “Knock it off or I’ll give you something to cry about.” But after all these people had basically spat on the gifts that God had given to them. Last week we read the Ten Commandments and we know what God’s people were doing when Moses returned from a top the mountain. There is also the instance where God’s people complain because they have nothing to eat, so God provides mana and quail for them so that they do not go hungry. But here, there is nothing that they truly require. Our text states that they simply became impatient and thus spoke out against God, insulting him to his face and belittling the gifts that he had provided for them on the way. I understand why God reacted the way that he did. I’m certain that those of you who are parents have felt belittled or disrespected by your children at some point. I can remember times when I said foolish things to my parents like, “You never do anything for me.” Melodramatic yes I know. But when you’re frustrated you sometimes speak before you understand which words are going to come out of your mouth. My question is that is the response that God gives to his people, sending them doom via viper, indicative of something other than frustration because that’s certainly what it looks like. This certainly seems as though God has had enough.

 In a similar way, throughout the third chapter of John, it seems as though Jesus is getting frustrated with Nicodemus. How could a man who has studied scripture not understand the things that Jesus was saying? We have the benefit of nearly 2000 years of analysis of this chapter, not to mention the knowledge of what Jesus would do after this conversation, that illumine the words that Jesus speaks for us. Nicodemus did not have that luxury. But still, even after so much time, look at all the division that is amongst simply Christians. Look at how many different denominations there are, divided on things like baptism, the Lord’s Supper, homosexuality, and women’s ordination. Even today we still have a hard time grasping what it is that Jesus means when he speaks. But John 3:16, we understand that one right? “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” We understand that to demonstrate the amount of love that God has for us. But what does sending serpents say about the amount that God loves us? Isn’t justice and punishment a form of love? How many of you have told your children, “This hurts me more than it hurts you.”? Do you think that God delights in punishing us? I think it is fairly safe to say that is not a true statement. Because the punishment from God is not like the punishment parents give to their children on earth. It is far different. There is much more that is at stake. I’m certain that God did not delight in watching the people he had delivered out of Egypt succumb to snake bites. We ourselves have been in a similar situation. Paul tells us, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience…” Do you think that God delighted in the fact that we were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we walked? Every Sunday we confess that we are worthy of God’s temporal and eternal punishment. Do you think he would delight in that?

 Certainly not. God does not delight in our punishment. Earlier I asked what God’s love looks like, well here we have a concrete example. God loved the Israelites, after all they were his people. But when his people come to him acknowledging their failure he gives them relief. Paul tells us, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ…” Just as God gave the Israelites a serpent on a pole, God gave us a similar sign, the cross, the sign of the instance in which the punishment which we deserved passed over us, and was laid upon God’s only Son. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. That’s John 3:17 by the way. So many people believed that the Son of God would come down to free God’s people by leading great armies against their enemies. But if we go back to Genesis 3:15, the first promise of a savior, it isn’t a political or earthly enemy that God is talking about. He is speaking of the great serpent, Satan. Now in the middle ages, it was not uncommon for kings to display their defeated enemies from atop their walls so everyone could see. The cross is a similar tool. It was used by the Romans to put the suffering of people who had committed terrible crimes on display. God uses the cross similarly, to put his love on display, but also, to show the defeat of the serpent. The cross is just like the bronze serpent on a pole except for the fact that it is not anything made of bronze hanging on the cross. It is the hopes and dreams of Satan himself that die there along with his dominion over God’s people. Jesus hung from the cross as a display of God’s love. Satan now hangs on the cross as a display of God’s power over death. The cross is our trophy, an indicator of what God’s love looks like. Satan now hangs as a display of God’s power over death. You know I find it truly amazing that God uses such similar signs and wonders throughout the course of scripture in order to point us towards Christ. The cross offers more than what Moses could offer. The bronze serpent only brought temporary healing. Now with the great serpent high upon the pole we receive eternal life. That is what God’s love looks like. It looks like a God who wants to have a relationship with his creation. It looks like a God who so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.